Volume 16, Number 1
our Winter/Spring 2011 issue
featuring the winners of the COR Annual Literary Prizes

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“Hidden everywhere, a myriad leather seed-cases lie in wait…”
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”
Thomas Kinsella

CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW
A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE WORKS

Vol. 16 No. 1

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Thomas Kinsella

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A Note on Our Cover

The four photographs on the cover are by Allison Joseph and Jon Tribble. The photographs of this public statuary were taken in Windsor, Ontario (elephant detail); Cape Girardeau, Missouri (alligator); Robinsonville, Mississippi (polar bear); and Little Rock, Arkansas (guardian statue).

Announcements

We would like to congratulate one of our recent contributors, Elizabeth Enslin. Elizabeth Enslin’s essay “Ama,” which appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Volume 14, Number 1 (Winter/Spring 2009), was listed as a Notable Essay of 2009 in The Best American Essays, edited by Christopher Hitchens.
Our Poetry, Fiction, & Literary Nonfiction Prizes
& the Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award

2011 Richard Peterson
Poetry Prize Winner

Three Poems by Catherine Anderson
(Kansas City, Missouri)

2011 Jack Dyer
Fiction Prize Winner

“Mutare” by Greta Schuler
(Washington, DC)

2011 John Guyon
Literary Nonfiction Prize Winner

“Flight from Hungary”
by Erika Reich Giles
(Mercer Island, Washington)

2010 Charles Johnson
Student Fiction Award Winner

“Calls That Carry for Miles”
by Rachel Furey
(Texas Tech University, Lubbock)
We are pleased to announce the winners and finalists for the 2011 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize.

In poetry, the winning entry is three poems—“The Corner,” “Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves,” and “The Men Wore Hats”—by Catherine Anderson of Kansas City, Missouri. In fiction, the winning entry is “Mutare” by Greta Schuler of Washington, D.C. In literary nonfiction, the winning entry is “Flight from Hungary” by Erika Reich Giles of Mercer Island, Washington. The finalists in poetry are three poems—“In the Garden of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen,” “Covenant,” and “My Job as a Child”—by Julie Hanson and three poems—“Blackberries,” “Abrams Creek,” and “Lullaby”—by Nancy K. Pearson. Finalists in fiction are “Strip Mine” by E. Farrell and “Inheritance” by Julia Phillips. Finalists in literary nonfiction are “Translation: Here Fishy, Fishy” by Jessica Hendry Nelson and “The Beginning” by Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo.

The final judge for the poetry competition was Allison Joseph, Crab Orchard Review’s editor and poetry editor, and the final judge for the fiction and literary nonfiction competitions was Carolyn Alessio, Crab Orchard Review’s prose editor. All three winners received $1500 and their works are published in this issue. All of the six finalists also chose to have at least some of their works published in this issue. Congratulations to the winners and finalists, and thanks to all the entrants for their interest in Crab Orchard Review.

Crab Orchard Review’s website has information on subscriptions, calls for submissions and guidelines, contest information and results, and past, current, and future issues. Results for the 2012 Literary Prizes (which are closed to entries) will be announced on September 1, 2011.

Visit us at:

CrabOrchardReview.siu.edu
Crab Orchard Review is pleased to announce that Dr. Charles Johnson selected “Calls That Carry for Miles” by Rachel Furey (Texas Tech University; Lubbock, Texas) as the winner of the 2010 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award. We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the award: “The First Good Thing” by Lauri M. Anderson (Texas Tech University; Lubbock, Texas), “To Cook an Egg Gently” by James Scoles (Southern Illinois University; Carbondale, Illinois), and “Pitch” by Janet Thielke (University of Southern California; Los Angeles, California).

The Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award from Southern Illinois University Carbondale is an annual award competition intended to encourage increased artistic and intellectual growth among college and university students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as reward excellence and diversity in creative writing. Each year, $1000 and a signed copy of a Charles Johnson book will be awarded to the winner. The winning entry will also be published in the Winter/Spring issue of Crab Orchard Review. The award is co-sponsored by Charles Johnson, Crab Orchard Review, and the SIUC Department of English and College of Liberal Arts.

The 2011 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award competition is closed. The results will be announced on September 1, 2011, and complete guidelines for the 2012 award will be available at:

johnson.siu.edu
Our new social worker reported for duty—in a jean skirt and over-the-knee boots—on the same day that the first truth storm rolled in off the Blue Ridge. I was already on edge that morning, because Vicky and I had tried to conceive a baby all weekend, which can be a dispiriting task when you don’t actually want a baby. If that weren’t enough to wear out my nerves, some dimwit had driven his eighteen wheeler into the height-restricted tunnel between Leerburg and Oblivion, shutting down I-63 and making me forty minutes late to relieve the night shrink. By the time I arrived at the psychiatric emergency room, a downpour pelted the steel awning above the ambulance dock, and half the lunatics in Lovelace County had bivouacked in the triage bay.

Mondays are usually busy, of course, but that means three or four admissions—maybe a schizophrenic off his medications and a handful of detox candidates. It’s not that we don’t have mental illness here in the Piedmont—it’s just that it stays clear of hospitals for as long as it can. But that morning we had seven patients queued up for evaluation. Seven. And except for one of our regular meth fiends, these newcomers looked so unlike our usual customers that, if not for the cotton gowns, I wouldn’t have been able to distinguish the patients from the spouses.

I apologized to Steinhoff, the overnight shrink, and surveyed the row of newly-minted charts. Our first contestant in the Psychiatric Evaluation Game was to be Wilson, Archibald. Date-of-Birth: 11–27–1941. Time-of-Arrival: 11:38 p.m. As I skimmed the man’s medical records—conspicuously lacking in any prior psychiatric diagnosis—I sensed myself the target of inquisitive eyes. I continued to thumb through Wilson’s paperwork, unwilling to succumb to distraction. Then I snapped shut the binder and looked up abruptly, as I often do to keep the medical students vigilant, hoping to catch my unsuspecting adversary off-guard. My observer, an almond-eyed brunette, greeted me with a smile as honest and disarming as a bank check.
“I’m Marlena,” she said. “I’m taking over for Lurleen Hodges.”

Lurleen Hodges had been the psychiatric social worker in the Methodist General ER since the first colonists arrived from England.

“Ian Shaddock, head-shrinker _du jour_,” I replied. “You’re stuck with me until six o’clock.” She offered me a small, freckled hand with fuchsia-lacquered nails, and I clasped it for a moment longer than I had intended—our eyes locked in a guarded embrace. Then I broke away and asked, “Shall we go meet some patients?”

Marlena plucked Archibald Wilson’s chart from my grip. “Actually, I’ve already met them,” she said—almost a taunt. “Would you like me to introduce you?”

“Yes, please,” I agreed. “By all means.”

So we’d started wrangling even before we joined the Wilsons in the triage bay and listened to their unfolding tragedy.

Archie Wilson was a retired service station operator who’d lost an index finger to an ordinance accident while in the navy. His wife, Lil, a mousy creature in a floral-print skirt that could have passed for upholstery, did most of the talking.

“We’re living up in the hills north of Pikesville now, near our daughters,” she said. “One’s a dental hygienist. Other’s married to a state trooper. Never had no mental problems in our family on either side. And then last night, Archie goes out in the rain to fetch the groceries from the truck, and he comes back raving like a madman.”

“Raving?” I inquired noncommittally.

“Well, doc, we were about to have supper and I asked him what he wanted to do afterwards. All day, you see, we’d been planning to stroll down to the river, but we hadn’t been counting on a squall. So I ask Archie, ‘What do you want to do after supper?’ And do you know what he says? He says, ‘Honestly, Lil, I want to drive out to Baby Darling’s place and screw her brains out.’” Mrs. Wilson’s tiny, pale face seemed to shrink even smaller. “Baby Darling’s my niece—my nineteen-year-old niece,” she explained. “Her real name’s Barbara, but everybody calls her Baby Darling.”

I glanced toward her husband to gauge his reaction, but he appeared unfazed.

“She’s telling ya the truth, doc,” agreed Archie Wilson. “Been feeling that way for a couple of years now—but can’t for the life of me fathom why I ever told Lil….What kind of crazy thing is that to say to the woman you’ve been married to for forty-three years, even if she has let her looks go?”

My initial fear was for something organic: a brain tumor or an intracranial bleed. Those are the usual culprits when healthy folks go bonkers on a dime, so I admitted Wilson to the hospital for a CT scan and labs. Then the next couple, a pair of high school teachers from Laurendale, served up roughly the same story. He’d gone out to cover his strawberry patch with burlap before the storm, came back soaking wet and confessed that he’d been romancing the captain of the boys’ junior varsity lacrosse team. Now I was starting to suspect that I was the target of a perverse practical joke, maybe Steinhoff’s revenge for my chronic lateness, but I’d been sued one too many times to take any chances, so I ordered another complete workup.

When the following patient, a grain feed merchant, related how he’d admitted to his wife that he was also married to a second woman in North Carolina, that he’d just blurted it out, after they had gotten stranded in a downpour, I grew uneasy. In medicine, a series of three cases qualifies as evidence—and here were a trio of husbands who’d bared their souls unwittingly after encountering bouts of precipitation. Not that I really believed the weather itself had forced these men to come clean. I was still thinking correlation, not causation. But then Flo Bernice, our NP, flipped on the radio at the nurse’s station, and soon we were all absorbed in the news of the truth storms. I wasn’t the only one, it appeared, who had connected the overnight tempest to the unexpected sincerity that had swept across central Virginia.

“Some first day you’re having,” I said to Marlena. “I suppose the moral of the story is that you should never lie to your spouse.”

“Is that your professional psychiatric wisdom, Ian?”

I wasn’t prepared for her to call me by my first name. Lurleen Hodges, several million times my age, had always addressed me as Dr. Shaddock.


Marlena shook her head—and one of her sassy bangs drooped over her eyes. She brushed it away, her pupils ablaze with an insouciant twinkle. “I can’t offer an official medical opinion,” she said, “but my experience has been the complete opposite. Total honesty is never good for relationships. Mystery is sexy.”

“And you really believe that?”

“How else can you explain why these couples have been happy for so long? What do you think kept the passion alive for Archie and
Lil? Certainly not him telling her that he wanted to screw her teenage niece....You see my point?”

I didn’t. Not exactly. But I sensed that I stood merely a raindrop or two away from expressing something that I would later regret, so I focused on typing up Archie Wilson’s admission note, and strove to channel my thoughts away from whatever perilous and subversive secrets lurked behind Marlena’s innocent beauty.

By the end of my shift, I’d given up on admitting every truth-spewing patient to the hospital. We didn’t have enough beds. I limited myself to accepting the handful so straight-shooting that I feared their spouses might murder them—and discharged the remainder armed with the phone number for a local couples therapist. When I finally arrived home, after another forty-minute detour around the Leerburg-Oblivion Tunnel, I found Vicky in her bathrobe at the kitchen table, nibbling chocolate-covered orange peels from the box and perusing her album of potential sperm donors as though it were a housekeeping magazine. I didn’t even have a chance to remove my tie before she thrust the album under my nose.

“What do you think of him?” she demanded. “Don’t you just love that chin?”

Fourteen months earlier, after my wife lost her library job due to budget cuts, and we’d decided to have a child the old-fashioned way, Vicky had spent her days compiling lists of baby names. Now that she was leaning toward in vitro fertilization—at $30,000 a shot—she’d acquired a “sperm catalogue” from a local clinic and devoted her afternoons to rating photographs and biographies of prospective fathers. She’d already crossed me off the list. “For thirty grand,” she’d insisted, without a hint of apology, “we deserve perfection.” Since I didn’t believe any child, perfect or flawed, was worth $30,000, we’d reached a compromise: We’d attempt to make a baby on our own for another two months, and if we failed, then Dr. Sanditz would concoct one for us in a test tube. I’d considered telling Vicky that I didn’t want a child at all—that some people aren’t cut out for parenting, and after forty-two years of living, I’d figured out that I was one of them—but I sensed such a confession might destroy our marriage.

“What’s not to love?” I replied. “That’s a blue-ribbon chin if ever I saw one. I bet tourists come from miles around to admire it.”

“Don’t start with me, Ian,” said Vicky.

“I’m not starting anything.”
I crossed the foyer, entered my study and opened my attaché case atop the desk blotter. My wife followed me. She stood arms akimbo in the doorway, limned by the incandescent glow of the dining room chandelier.

“You asked whether I liked Mr. Perfect Chin,” I said. “And I’m telling you that I do. I mean, if they awarded Nobel Prizes for chins, that guy would be headed to Stockholm….I know some people want a smart son or a loving son. But as far as I’m concerned, just give me a carefully-sculpted mandible—and then the boy can become a sociopathic dunce for all I care.”

Vicky shook her head—and then smiled in spite of herself. “Are you finished?”

“Almost. Have you considered that Dr. Sanditz might brew us up a girl? You’ll concede that’s not exactly the most feminine of chins….”

Vicky sighed as though tired of reasoning with a wayward toddler. “Can we talk about something else?” she asked. “How was work?”

“Insane. I take it you heard about the truth storms….”

My wife nodded. “So you believe in them?”

“I don’t not believe,” I answered. “Let’s say I’m an agnostic for now.”

“That’s so like you, Ian. You really are agnostic about everything these days.”

She was right too. Over our fifteen years together—during which my parents had passed away and I’d lost my bid for tenure at the state medical college—I had acquired an over-developed sense of skepticism. I no longer believed in anything that wasn’t nailed down. Vicky, on the other hand, still possessed sufficient ideals for the pair of us. Not a month passed when we weren’t boycotting some essential consumer product to save a rare species of bird or amphibian that I’d never before heard of.

My wife strode to the bookcase and ran her fingertips along the spines of my medical texts. She avoided my gaze. “I probably shouldn’t even mention this, Ian,” she said, her voice not much above a whisper, “but sometimes I find myself wondering if you genuinely want a baby.”

“Of course, I do,” I lied.

“Do you really?”

We stood face to face in the dim light of the study, surrounded by knee-high stacks of abstracts torn from mental health journals. The shag carpet, matted with age, was hardly visible. I remembered when we’d first moved into the house, and the room had been nearly bare, and we’d made love for hours on the same rug.

“Really,” I said. “Let me show you.”
But even as I caressed Vicky’s cheek, and traced her lips with my fingertips, I was thinking of Marlena Badger’s firm chest and well-toned calves.

Vicky broke our kiss. “I’m glad about the truth storms,” she said. “I hope everybody gets doused with a bit of truth serum. That way I’d know what people truly wanted—what you truly wanted.”

“Aren’t you the least bit afraid that your darkest secrets would be exposed?” I asked.

My wife looked sincerely puzzled. “What secrets?”

That was the difference between us: Vicky didn’t have secrets, at least not of any significance. She was a children’s librarian, an ex-Girl Scout, which was part of the innocence that had first attracted me to her. Secrecy just wasn’t her way. I warned myself that only a fool resents his wife for not being more mysterious, and I kissed her again—passionately—determined to blot out any transient feelings that I had for my new coworker. Soon we were making love on the carpet, scattering scientific reprints, laboring valiantly to unite sperm and egg. Outside crashed the rage of distant thunder, roaring across the foothills, and later rose the gentle patter of raindrops against the roof.

I worked in the ER on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tuesdays and Thursdays, I treated private patients in a second-story office above Lovelace County’s first authentic Tibetan restaurant. The space was dirt cheap, but my last few patients of the evening occasionally enjoyed strains of Himalayan music and, after two o’clock, the exquisite (albeit distracting) aroma of roasting goat, so I had to schedule my bulimic teenagers for early in the day. That morning, of course, my patients were uniformly focused on the truth storms. None of them had been afflicted themselves, it turned out, but they each knew somebody—or at least of somebody—who’d gotten caught in one of the squalls. I say squalls—plural—because another cell of cloudbursts had apparently exploded over Oblivion the previous night, carving a path of brute candor in its wake. I couldn’t help but notice that, although the sky was clear, so clear you could see the bifurcated peaks of Saddleback Mountain on the horizon, my patients came fortified with mackintoshes and galoshes and umbrellas. One of my obsessive-compulsives even carried a satchel containing neoprene mittens and a scuba mask.

I spent hours listening to squall stories—tales of near misses, of neighbors and colleagues not so fortunate. What became evident, as the day progressed, was how much genuine terror these truth storms
provoked. One of my longtime therapy patients even revealed that he’d been seeing another shrink on the side—and wanted to apologize now, in advance, before he was compelled by what he called “the God-rain.” Several others sought advice on how to disclose infidelities to their spouses and financial indiscretions to their employers. The most distraught proved to be Maureen W., a depressed housewife who’d been exposed to the rain while returning from her weekly rendezvous with her longtime lover at a roadside motel outside Wilkey’s Crossing. The poor woman had stepped into her own living room later that day, braced to ruin her marriage, and discovered that she hadn’t been caught in a truth storm at all, but merely an ordinary summer deluge. “I determined right then and there that, from that moment forward, I’d confine myself to one man and only one man,” Maureen confided in me. “But I’ve been up tossing and turning all night, Dr. Shaddock, and I can’t for the life of me decide which one it’s to be.”

My final therapy patient that afternoon was Graham Marshall, a confirmed narcissist whose family owned the Laurendale Times-Courier. The Marshall clan had also donated a state-of-the-art pediatric wing to Methodist General, so I endured their most prodigal offspring twice weekly to keep my bread buttered. It did not surprise me that Graham arrived without an umbrella; at forty-five, he still managed to exude an adolescent’s overconfidence. Yet as soon as he settled onto the sofa, wiping sweat from the trunk of his neck with a handkerchief, I detected something amiss. I’d never seen Marshall look so ashen, so exposed.

“You’ve got to help me, Shaddock,” he said. “I got myself licked by that downpour last night and I’ve been saying the stupidest things.”

“What have you been saying?” I asked.

Marshall launched into a complicated and tedious description about how he’d told his mistress in Richmond about his other mistress in Leerburg. “Bullshit,” he exclaimed at one point. “What right does she have to get mad at me for, Shaddock? The only reason I didn’t tell her before was that I was looking out for her feelings. You hear what I’m saying, Shaddock?” Graham Marshall cupped his fist in his palm; the veins on the back of his hand pulsed angrily. “Say, what the hell are you thinking about?”

I kept my expression smooth and impassive, my hands locked over my folded knee. “It sounds like you’ve been through a lot.”

“Fuck that, Shaddock. You weren’t listening,” grumbled Marshall. “I never believe you actually listen to me, but right now I’m sure of it.”

“Please, Graham, I—”
“This is such total bullshit,” he interjected as he stood up. “You can’t even tell me my babe’s name, can you?”

He was right, this time. My imagination had somehow drifted to Marlena Badger again, and I was daydreaming through all the clever retorts that I should have served up when she’d offered to introduce me to my own patients. Each scenario started with a display of searing repartee—and ended with the ferocious entangling of limbs and clothes and lips.

That night the Piedmont witnessed some of the worst flash floods we’d experienced in decades. On the ten o’clock news, we watched families trapped on the upper floors of their homes—but afraid to climb to their rooftops, where drop-ladders from helicopters awaited, for fear of exposure to the truth-tinged elements. At daybreak the following morning, deep, muddy puddles cratered our lawn and a sheen of rainwater lacquered the exposed surfaced of my Oldsmobile. My wife fashioned me a veritable burqa from plastic garbage bags as armor for my sortie across the driveway.

Even as Vicky draped me in my polyethylene breastplate, I was anxious to get to the hospital—to see Marlena. At the same time, I despised myself for this longing, and for growing irritable at my wife’s efforts, when she was laboring to protect me. I’d never felt as lonely in my forty-two years as I did that day, driving through the newly reopened tunnel under Chadwick’s Ridge. If I actually had been cheating on my wife, I could have unburdened myself to my mistress. But my “mistress” was merely a fantasy—a stranger I’d known for fifty hours—so I couldn’t share my secret with Vicky, and didn’t dare reveal it to Marlena. Instead, I hauled my infatuation around like a head of dynamite. At the emergency room, although I’d made a point of arriving half an hour early, our new social worker was already at her desk, snacking on a cup of yogurt.

“Are you ready to introduce me to my patients?” I asked preemptively.

“Sure thing, boss,” she agreed—and somehow boss, from her mouth, sounded even more irreverent than Ian. “Or do you want to discuss the follow-ups first?”

“Follow-ups?”

Marlena licked a film of yogurt from her upper lip. “The follow-ups from Monday. Mr. Wilson…Mr. Glover…Ms. Marcus. I’m worried about Mr. Wilson. He told me that if he can’t ‘shake this honesty bug’—that’s how he phrased it—he’s going to throw himself into a gorge.”
That was the first—and only—moment in my life when I’ve ever understood what it meant for a person to ‘lose it’—when I could actually sense the mad steam rising within me like hot vapor inside a tea kettle. The muscles around my Adam’s apple tightened and my wits clouded over.

“You saw Mr. Wilson again?” I asked. “In this hospital?”

“Why? Haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t,” I answered. If anybody else had asked this question, I would have explained that the ER shrink’s job is disposition, not care. I either admit the patients or send them home; another physician is paid to treat them. From both administrative and medical standpoints, that approach makes good sense. But at the prospect of sharing it with Marlena, the policy suddenly sounded like a gross dereliction of duty, so instead I modified my denial with the concession, “Not yet.” I was willing to poke my head into Archie Wilson’s room during my lunch break if that meant saving face.

I hoped that would bury the issue. It didn’t.

“You do follow up on your admissions, don’t you?” pressed Marlena.

“When I have the opportunity,” I replied. “It’s hard to carve out the time if you’re not getting paid for it.”

Marlena tossed her yogurt container into the wastepaper basket.

“I tell myself I get paid back in other ways,” she said—and I couldn’t discern whether her tone was naïve or mocking. “You can’t imagine how grateful Mr. Wilson was to see me….”

That was too much. I felt the last vestiges of my authority—if I’d ever had any—evaporating like mist off a lake. Marlena had me so flustered that I couldn’t even make eye contact with her. Out in the triage bay, Flo Bernice was drawing blood from an obese patient while simultaneously singing along to her Oldies Station. A poorly-photocopied sign above the fax machine read: “Sudden death is God’s way of warning you to slow down.” We’d had a routine in the psych ER before Lurleen Hodges retired—maybe not the most efficient routine in the annals of modern medicine, but a functional routine nonetheless—and that routine didn’t involve follow-up visits or social workers calling MDs by their first names.

I sat down on the threadbare couch across from Marlena’s workstation.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“Sure,” agreed Marlena. “You’re the boss.”

“What did you do before you became a social worker?”

Marlena shrugged. “This and that. Nothing productive.” Her fair,
diaphanous skin appeared fragile under the fluorescent light—and rather than threatening, the girl now appeared young and defenseless. “I was a born-again Christian for a couple of years, and then I played the mandolin in a bluegrass band. Mostly, I managed to hurt people a lot, and got hurt myself a lot too—I suppose that’s why I became a social worker. At the time, it just seemed like a steady job a person could do without screwing up, but now I figure it also must be about undoing some of the pain and damage I’ve caused….Say, if I were your patient, would you give me extra credit or something for that explanation?”

“You’re not my patient,” I replied—and I realized that I was grinning, that all of my frustration had instantly vaporized. “But you are infuriating. Has anybody ever told you that before?”

“Sure, all the time, boss,” said Marlena as the insouciant twinkle returned to her eyes. “Practically every man who ever wanted to sleep with me.”

My throat nearly closed up entirely. It crossed my thoughts that Marlena had been caught in the squall herself—that her candor was storm-purchased—but her honesty was too confident to be involuntary. If she were, in fact, being honest. The truth of the matter was that the more our new social worker revealed herself to me, the more I sensed that she had other secrets lurking behind her open ones.

Marlena stood up and sashayed toward the triage bay, her clogs reverberating against the tiled floor.

“Like I told you, I’m very good at hurting people,” she said. “Luckily for you, I have an unbreakable rule against getting involved with doctors.”

Archie Wilson’s brain MRI coincided with my lunch break, so I didn’t have an opportunity to see him until the end of my shift at six o’clock. He and his wife were watching television in the patient lounge of the fifth-floor ward known as Jefferson East. In an ironic gesture, the first chairman of the psychiatry department had christened the inpatient units after Virginia’s earliest advocates for freedom—so that sociopaths occupied Washington North, and acutely suicidal adolescents were housed on Patrick Henry West, where above the locked entrance, a carved inscription actually proclaimed, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Several other patients also relaxed around the lounge’s television—watching the proceedings of the House of Delegates. A state senator from Charlottesville had been drenched in a truth storm that afternoon and he was detailing a kickback scheme
from the well of the legislative chamber. I settled down beside the Wilsons, hoping to draw as little notice as possible. When Archie recognized me, he did indeed appear grateful.

“Hey, Lil. It’s the doctor from downstairs,” he said.

“Dr. Shaddock,” I re-introduced myself. “Rhymes with the fish.”

Lil Wilson beamed as though greeting an old friend and shook my hand. “Marlena promised us you would stop by.”

“Did she really?” I asked.

“I do hope you can help us,” continued Lil. “None of the doctors up here seem to know what they’re doing….Archie is talking as crazy as ever. Crazier!”

“She’s right, doc. I keep saying whatever’s on my mind.” A smirk flashed beneath his hoary mustache and then melted into a chuckle.

“Yesterday, I told one of the colored nurses—gal from one of those Spanish islands—that dark-skinned women made me hard. I know that’s a nutso thing to say…rude too…but I couldn’t stop myself. And you should have seen the look on that gal’s pretty face when I said it.”

“You have to help us, doc,” pleaded Lil. “To tell you the Lord’s honest truth, when I first heard that radio preacher going on about the God-rain, I thought—as a Christian—that’s not such a bad idea. Never going to happen, I told myself—but it wouldn’t be so awful if it did. But now that it has come true, I swear I can’t imagine anything worse.”

I sensed my adrenal glands kicking into overdrive. I drew my chair closer to Lil Wilson’s, and inquired, “What radio preacher?”

“Didn’t I tell you about him? Goodness, I thought I had.”

“I don’t believe you did,” I replied—forcing back my excitement.

At that moment, Lil Wilson noticed a stain on her husband’s bathrobe, and started rubbing his lapel with a dry tissue. “You’ve got to be careful, Arch. Make sure you tuck your napkin in when you eat,” she said. “You’re beginning to look like one of those collages we saw at the museum.” When Lil Wilson had done her utmost to remove the blemish—and failed convincingly—she tucked the soiled tissue in her sleeve. She made no move to return to our prior conversation.

My only option was to prod her. “The radio preacher, Mrs. Wilson…?”

“Oh, the preacher,” she echoed. “Well I’m not much of a person for evangelism, but Archie goes in for that holy-roller stuff, so we were listening to this fellow on the drive back from my daughter’s. I can’t remember the guy’s name, but he’s got a booming, rapid-fire voice like a barker at the circus….And he predicted that next time it rained, the good Lord was going to baptize us all with the Rain of Truth….He
said this the very same day that Archie started talking crazy, and that cannot be a coincidence, as far as I’m concerned. The fellow preached we’re going to have an epidemic of honesty—that’s what he called it—said it came to him in a vision while he was grappling with a lie he told his own wife.” Lil Wilson clasped her husband’s hand lovingly. “That’s what we’re having, doc, isn’t it? An epidemic of honesty?”

“You could say that,” I agreed. “Now tell me something, please, Mrs. Wilson. I imagine lots of people probably heard this preacher…?”

“I’m sure they did. He’s got an enormous following, especially out by Pikesville,” she said. “His name is on the tip of my tongue….I can phone my daughter, if you think it would be useful….”

“That’s quite all right, Mrs. Wilson.” I shook both of their hands once more. “You’ve been a tremendous help already.”

“So do you think you can do something for Archie?”

“No promises, Mrs. Wilson,” I replied. “But I think we may make a dishonest man out of him yet.”

And then I was racing down the back stairs toward the psych ER, armed with my theory that our truth storms were nothing more than manifestations of mass hysteria—a twenty-first century rejoinder to Orson Welles’s *The War of the Worlds*. If Marlena wanted reports on follow-up visits, she was about to get one in spades. Unfortunately, as I’d feared, she’d already departed for the night. In the ER, Steinhoff manned the triage bay alone, his shirtsleeves rolled up, interviewing yet another truth-spewer. I let him do his work without divulging my secret.

**Thursdays were my early day at the office—I had patients booked solid from seven a.m. through lunchtime—but I couldn’t handle waiting another forty-eight hours to unburden myself, and I couldn’t imagine sharing my discovery with anyone other than Marlena, certainly not with Vicky, who was bound to dismiss my theory as cynicism, so I phoned my part-time secretary at home and had her clear my schedule.** The next morning, instead of driving out to Laurendale, I ordered an omelet at the diner opposite the hospital and read the *Times-Courier* until the time arrived for the day staff to start their shifts. When I ducked into the ER, Dr. Arcaya, the Tuesday-Thursday shrink, looked none-too-pleased to see me. Indignation disfigured every inch of her face from her equine nose to her two-tiered chin.

“You’re not poaching my shift,” she snapped. “I don’t give a fuck who you spoke to or what you worked out, this is *my* shift.”

“It’s good to see that you’re as charming as ever,” I replied. “But
I’m not poaching your precious shift. I’m only here to poach a social worker for a few minutes.”

Arcaya rolled her eyes. “She’s in the back,” said my colleague. “You can poach her permanently, as far as I’m concerned. I never thought I’d miss Lurleen Hodges, but at least Lurleen didn’t dress like a pole dancer.”

Making conversation with Aggie Arcaya is like pouring champagne down a sieve, so I stepped past her and knocked on the door of the windowless kitchenette where the nurses and social workers enjoyed their breaks. Marlena was sipping from a water bottle and reading a paperback novel. Her outfit—a checkered blouse knotted at the midriff and a pair of acid-wash dungarees—made her look more like a hippie lifeguard than an exotic dancer. Large-lensed sunglasses perched in her silky hair.

“I thought you were off on Thursdays,” said Marlena. “Don’t tell me you came all this way just to see me.” She was obviously joking—my expression must have given me away. “I already told you I’m bad news,” she added. “I should wear a sign around my neck that reads: APPROACH AT YOUR OWN RISK.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I replied—buoyed by my own confidence. “You wanted follow-up, right? Well I think I’ve cracked the case….”

I spent the next ten minutes pacing the small kitchenette, outlining the history of mass hysteria from the Dancing Plague of 1518 to the Salem Witch Trials to the alleged exploits of the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. Dr. Freud himself never delivered such a convincing discourse—but I imagine he never had an audience so alluring. When I finally alighted backwards into the folding chair beside Marlena, I had little doubt that I’d won her over to my views. I suddenly found my eyes fixed on hers, our faces far closer than I’d intended. She didn’t look away.

“So what’s the cure for mass hysteria, Dr. Shaddock?” she asked.

Her use of my last name proved a paradoxical stroke of intimacy. Whatever else I had intended to say about mass hysteria was lost to the ether.

“A cure costs extra,” I quipped. “Besides, if I shared all of my trade secrets today, I’d have nothing to keep your attention tomorrow.”

Marlena’s face was now only inches from mine. “If I didn’t know better, Dr. Shaddock, I’d say you were flirting with me,” she said. “And here I thought you were a married man….”

“Not exactly married,” I replied.

That was the first time I’d ever concealed my marriage. It was easier than I could ever have imagined. Too easy. Marlena placed her
pale, freckled hand over my own—and I suddenly realized that she was squeezing my wedding band.

“Good,” she said. “In that case, I don’t exactly have a boyfriend.”

And then we kissed. Not a fierce, sensual kiss—but just enough of a kiss to confirm that we would kiss again.

“I thought you had a policy against getting involved with doctors,” I observed—a unable to resist a triumphant salvo.

“Oh, that. I was lying through my teeth,” rejoined Marlena. “If I’d told you I had a fetish for doctors, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

We kissed again. Soon we were making out like teenagers on the loveseat in the kitchenette, fumbling and caressing flesh under clothes. At one point, admiring the curve of Marlena’s bare shoulder, I actually shuddered with relief: This was the first time in over a year that I’d enjoyed human contact for its own sake—where the goal was connecting with another person, not creating a third. We could have spent the entire day like that, half-clothed and lust-blind, but eventually we came to our senses. We’d have many other opportunities to meet, I assured myself, when a legion of lunatics wasn’t seeking my partner’s attention on the other side of the drywall. Besides, Aggie Arcaya was exactly the sort of creature to report Marlena to the director of social work.

Afterward, Marlena brewed us both cups of tea.

“How certain are you that it’s only mass hysteria?” she asked.

“Certainty isn’t my strong suit,” I answered candidly. “I think it’s safe to say it’s a reasonable possibility....”

“In that case,” she replied, wrapping her slender arms around my waist. “Make sure you don’t get caught out in the rain.”

Three of the patients I saw that afternoon claimed to have been caught in truth squalls, but now I believed that I had some insight into their “disease”—and I was thrilled to discover that one of them, a new referral who came seeking help for her pathological fear of pigeons, had actually heard Reverend Yancey’s radio homily on what he’d termed “the impending deluge of integrity.” My two other patients knew nothing of Yancey, but they did know about the truth storms before their symptoms appeared, so contagious hysteria remained a plausible etiology. Unfortunately, as with most psychiatric ailments, identifying the condition proved far easier than curing it. And I still wasn’t certain of my diagnosis. When I encountered a light drizzle on the tortuous drive up Chadwick’s Ridge—the tunnel between Oblivion and Leerburg had yet again
been washed out by a rockslide—I made a point of firmly sealing the windows of the Oldsmobile.

After my morning tryst with Marlena, I couldn’t stomach climbing into bed with Vicky for our nightly fertility ritual. On the drive home, I hatched various excuses—an assortment of toothaches and migraines and sciatic limbs—that might win me a brief reprieve, at least until I had an opportunity to regain my emotional bearings. Traffic inched its way along the narrow, winding detour—and the rain followed down the slope of the ridge, forcing me to park inside our garage. To my surprise, as I rummaged through my pockets for my house key, my wife opened the door. Vicky sported her skimpiest black negligee over a scarlet thong and garters. She’d even tucked a fresh daisy into her hair, like the one she’d worn on our very first date.

“Like what you see, doctor?” she asked.

“Of course, I do,” I said. “But give me a second to take my tie off—”

Vicky pressed her lips against mine, smothering my words. Her arms wrapped around my sport-jacket. I could smell the sweet aroma of her shampoo, also the more pungent scents of the garage: dead leaves, musty newspapers, mildew. Above us, raindrops pelted the roof in an ominous rhythm. I tried to give myself over to my wife’s passion, letting my body yield to hers.

“Tonight is the night, doctor. I can feel it,” said Vicky, coming up for air. “Nine months from now, you’re going to be changing diapers.”

She kissed me again and ran her fingers through my hair, but whatever lust I’d been able to muster failed me at the prospect of soiled diapers. I withdrew my lips from Vicky’s as tenderly as I could manage.

“Let me go inside and wash up,” I said. “I’ll feel much more romantic once I cleanse the hospital off of me.”

Vicky’s expression hardened and the narrow groove deepened between her eyes. “What were you doing at the hospital?” she asked. “It’s a Thursday.”

“Emergency,” I replied. “They needed extra coverage.”

My lie hovered in the damp, dusky air of the garage. Vicky’s slender frame cast a long shadow under the muted light of the ceiling bulb. She remained in the doorway, blocking my path, rubbing the backs of her knuckles with her fingers. I waited until I thought the danger had passed, and then I said, “I love you.”

“Dammit, Ian, I’m not an idiot,” snapped Vicky. “You don’t want to have a baby, do you? Why can’t you at least have the decency to admit it?”
Because then you might leave me, I could have said. Or I might have admitted that I didn’t know what I wanted. Vicky had opened the door wide to unvarnished candor. Alas, I was too much of a coward to step through the aperture. Besides, I wasn’t willing to toss away fifteen years of marriage on account of a one-time tryst with a coworker—no matter how intoxicating that coworker happened to be.

“Of course, I want a baby,” I lied. “You’re not thinking clearly, Vicky. Why would I be going through all of this if I didn’t want a baby?”

“Okay, then prove it,” Vicky ordered.

I reached for her cheek, thinking we would return to our lovemaking, but she swatted away my hand. Her face, so recently brimming with longing and adoration, now displayed all of the kindness of a sheet of corrugated tin. The staccato of raindrops above us swelled toward an angry crescendo. Suddenly, I understood what my wife wanted from me.

“Do it,” insisted Vicky. “Go outside and then tell me you want a baby.”

“That’s crazy,” I answered. “Do you understand what this means, Vicky? Once I go out there, I won’t ever be able to....”

I didn’t bother to complete my own sentence. Exposing myself to a truth storm would have only one consequence—and to my wife, I realized, that one consequence was actually desirable. Of course, if I were correct about the mass hysteria, then I had nothing to fear from the downpour. Moreover, even if the truth storms were real, the current deluge might not be of the truth-generating variety. But exposing myself to the torrent was a grave risk. I couldn’t imagine anything worth such a high-stakes gamble—except possibly my marriage.

I pressed the wall switch and the garage door rumbled upward.

“Please, Vicky,” I begged. “What if I have to tell a white lie at work...?”

“What’s more important?” responded Vicky. “Lying or me?”

So I trudged across the dusty concrete of the garage like a captive soldier. Then I crossed onto the asphalt driveway, the rain searing against my skin and clothing. Vicky joined me and clasped my hand in hers. Within seconds, my shirt was plastered to my chest and rivulets of water cascaded down my neck.

My wife turned my body to face hers. Dark streaks of eye liner connected the corners of her eyes to the corners of her mouth. Every inch of her flesh loomed visible beneath her negligee.

“Okay, now tell me. Do you want to have a baby?”

I waited for the unwanted words to emerge, latent secrets from some
unlocked trove of truth. “Yes,” I finally answered. “I do want to have a baby.”

But I still didn’t want a baby. Vicky couldn’t have known this, of course, and suddenly she was hugging me again, crying and nuzzling her head against my chest. In the distance, a glimmer of sunlight broke through the cloud cover. I felt a flash of self-revulsion: I could not imagine anyone wanting to bring a child into a world that contained liars like me. Then my wife tugged my arm by the fingers, drawing me toward the house, and we launched assiduously into our fertility duties.

The next morning, I was more than an hour early to relieve Steinhoff. “Consider it payback,” I told him. “Or at least a good start. Now I owe you only a few hundred more hours.” Needless to say, I had my ulterior motives. By the time the shift officially changed over at eight o’clock, I’d managed to admit two patients and discharge a third. I’d also dispatched Flo Bernice to the gourmet donut shop on Stanton Street, urging her to enjoy a very long break and to bring me back a toasted bagel. When Marlena arrived—stunning in her tight-fitting corduroy jacket—we had the entire psychiatric emergency room to ourselves. I immediately slid my hands around her slender waist.

“Please, Ian,” she objected “I don’t want that. Not right now.”

I let her slide her body from my grasp. She hung her canvas bag on the back of the office door and set her umbrella to drip dry in the kitchenette sink. Then she returned to her desk, silent and sullen.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I have more follow-up,” said Marlena. She swiveled her chair around toward me. “Lil Wilson phoned me early this morning. Archie was apparently released from Jefferson East yesterday....”

“And I take it he’s not any better,” I offered.

“It depends what you mean by better,” replied Marlena. “Do you remember how he warned me that if he couldn’t shake his honesty bug, he was going to throw himself into a gorge? Well, he did....He told Lil he was going for a stroll in the rain and he never returned....The state police fished the body out of Lyman’s Run around four a.m....”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Truly, I am.”

I was sorry, too, but I was also deeply relieved. At first, I’d feared that Marlena’s frosty mood related to our romance—that she’d second-guessed herself. I placed my hand atop her shoulder to soothe her. I yearned to tell her about what had happened the previous night, about
Vicky and the rain, but I sensed this was the wrong moment. Besides, now that I was fairly confident that the truth storms were a crowd phenomenon—fundamentally, an infectious hoax—Archie Wilson’s death seemed all the more tragic.

“The funeral is going to be on Monday in Pikesville,” said Marlena. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to take the whole day off. My boyfriend said he’d drive me.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “Your boyfriend.”

“I was at his place when Lil called. I was so upset, I ran outside half-naked,” said Marlena. Her entire body shuddered—maybe at the memory of the previous night’s calamity—and her delicate features lacked any hint of joy. Outside, the patter of rain on the ambulance dock had intensified, and a siren wailed a mournful lament in the distance. “Honestly, Ian, it’s too bad you were wrong about the truth storms,” she said. “You can’t imagine how sad that made me…."

“But I wasn’t wrong,” I said. “I—”

Marlena shook her head. “My boyfriend came outside looking for me. Then we both huddled in the rain and cried. So trust me, you’re wrong.” She placed her hand atop mine. “It’s all for the best,” she added. “Like I told you, mystery is sexy. Once you get to know me better, you’ll find me far less alluring.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “I suppose so….”

My thoughts had already drifted away from Marlena, away from the psychiatric emergency room, back toward Vicky. I was suddenly seized with a feverish desire to drive home as fast as my Oldsmobile could carry me. I would do it too, as soon as my shift ended, as soon as I could escape the liars’ asylum. Then I would take hold of my wife’s hand and we would walk, side by side, straight into the nearest deluge. We would keep walking, from storm to storm, until we found a patch of honest rain.
L. Annette Binder

Rise

He visited the city every night. He walked along its streets. His father lived there and the girl did too, and the air smelled of cinnamon and salt from the water. He saw no cars and no bicycles anywhere, no other pedestrians strolling between the buildings. The rooflines grew lower as he came to the water. The asphalt was jagged and split. Sometimes he stepped into puddles or slipped where the road was muddy. Sometimes he took off his shoes. There were ladies behind the windows. They reached for him between the bars and tried to catch his arm. All around him there were flowers. Jasmine and plumeria and gardenias with their perfume. Guava and stephanotis, he knew them when he saw them. He knew all the birds and trees.

It was always summer in the city. The air was always warm. He couldn’t find Leo or Gemini or Venus shining like the moon. He saw none of the southern constellations either, the ones he knew from books. He saw anchors and crosses and trailing vines. A moth opening its wings. Remember these things, he told himself. Take them with you when you leave.

The woman was waiting on the sand. She sat on a woven straw mat and strung blossoms from a basket, working them one into the next. Sit for a while, she said. Her skin was pale as the flowers she held. We’ve been waiting here for hours. Heat rose from the sand as if the earth itself were something living. He worked the blossoms onto the string, and his fingers were sticky from the petals. They worked together until the sun rose and the crickets stopped their singing.

Ruby opened the blinds so the sun could shine across the bed. She stood there in her leggings and her purple flannel robe. “Look at you,” she said. “I didn’t even have to sing.”

She hadn’t combed her hair yet and her curls looked electrified. The oatmeal was ready, but he needed to hurry because it was already half past seven.

The kitchen smelled like coffee when he came out. She needed
two cups to clear the clouds from her eyes, that’s what she always said. She stirred the brown sugar into the oatmeal and the dried blueberries and brought the bowls to the round table. “Maybe we’ll go riding this weekend,” she said. “Before it gets too cold.”

“The Chicago deal is heating up.”

“The air would do you good. It’s better than the gym.”

“I’ll know by Friday how the weekend looks.”

“Three thousand dollars for a tandem and now we never use it.” She tapped her finger against her front tooth, the one she’d had capped when she broke it on a cherry stone. She tilted her head and watched him scrape his bowl. She thought he was depressed. She’d say so any time there was an opening. That’s why he slept through his alarm clocks. Maybe he should see somebody because it wasn’t good to keep things bottled up. His father had been like that and look how things had gone for him. A heart attack at sixty-three and the bypasses couldn’t fix things once the damage was done. Nobody could help him, not even that specialist from Denver. It had been over a year and she had a referral for somebody good. A therapist with experience in bereavement. Go see him, Ethan, she always said. You can go at lunch if you want. Or when you’re done for the day.

She had so many ideas. They could bicycle for Alzheimer’s or walk for ovarian cancer. It would do him good to give something back, and he’d say yes, that’d be great and maybe next year, and how could she understand? She’d never been careless or unlucky. Everything she touched blossomed. Everything except for him. The African violets on the kitchen windowsill were blooming again, and last spring she’d built a greenhouse from a kit. She called it her church, and that’s what it looked like. It glowed in the evening when she worked. She had cherry tomatoes growing in there and orchids in hanging pots. Strange prehistoric-looking things with open-mouthed blossoms. Their roots curled in the air. It smelled like mushrooms inside and rotting wood and something else he couldn’t name. Come with me, she’d say. Why don’t you keep me company? And he’d go no farther than the door.

“Those folks in Chicago can wait,” she said. “A couple of hours on a Saturday won’t make any difference.”

“Two years away from the firm and you’ve forgotten what it’s like.” Ruby worked for a judge now. A Carter appointee with silver hair and things were always quiet in his chambers. She wrote bench memos three days a week, and he didn’t mind if she worked from home.

“I’m just trying to give you some perspective.” She came up
behind him to get his empty bowl and she kissed him on top of his head.

Here’s what he didn’t tell her: Thank God for the clients in Chicago who yelled at him all day. It was October already, and the deal wasn’t anywhere near closing. They still hadn’t signed the letter of intent because one of the partners always had a problem. The indemnification provisions were too broad or too narrow and the definitions were unclear. He fixed each issue as it came up, but there was always another. Bless them because they filled his days. Bless the clients and the IRS and the treadmill at the gym. He ran until his T-shirt was soaked and stuck against his skin. He answered calls and wrote his memos and did pull-ups on the bar. He was exhausted by eight and asleep by nine, and that’s where he found his peace.

She waited by the river and the reservoir and down along the sand. She waited only for him. She sat on a woven blanket and the air was so heavy and still. Don’t you want to see your father, she wanted to know. Don’t you want to meet my baby girl? Farther down the men were coiling ropes. Their boats rocked in the black water. They were ferrymen and fishermen, and their work was done for the day. Night has fallen around us. Set your work aside. She closed her eyes when she sang. Her voice never wavered. Sleep without any worries. I’ll always be your bride. She sang songs he’d never heard before, but he knew how they went.

He had four alarm clocks on his nightstand. He lined them up like soldiers. Analog and digital and an old-fashioned one with a bell and another that vibrated the whole mattress. The manufacturer called it the Sonic Boom. It was designed for narcoleptics and the hearing-impaired, but even on its highest setting it wasn’t strong enough. Only Ruby could wake him up. She pulled up the blinds and shook him by the shoulder, and if that didn’t work she sang all the songs he hated: “Feelings” and “My Sharona” and “Sometimes When We Touch,” and her voice cracked on the high notes. She sang into his ear, and she looked so relieved when he opened his eyes.

The little girl had been wearing a yellow dress. He hadn’t seen her as she crossed. Traffic was stopped in the right-hand lane, and he was talking with Ruby on the phone. She had the vegetables ready, but he needed to pick up a roasted chicken from King Soopers. One of the good ones this time and not one that was all dried out. He needed to pay attention. The law hadn’t taken effect yet, and it was perfectly legal
to use his cell. He changed lanes because those idiots would make him miss the light. He changed lanes because he was tired and because he was hungry and impatient and because there was no God.

The girl wore a yellow dress and there were flowers on the skirt. He saw these things. The flowers and her lace socks and the book bag she swung in the air. Her older sister was a few steps behind. She was close enough to see but powerless to change things. The girl flew over his hood. She cracked the glass as she went upwards. Light as a bird flushed from the bush. Light as a skipping stone. He knew what had happened before she came back down. He stopped the car and dropped his cell phone and ran back to where she was. She lay against a storm grate. Her long brown hair had come undone.

The older girl began to howl. A sound unlike any he’d heard before. She went to her knees and covered her baby sister. A bus driver came and tried to help, but she pushed him away. She set her palms over her sister’s nose and her bare feet and all the places she was bleeding. She moved her hands in circles. As if she could plug those holes and mend the bones where they had broken. She leaned over her sister and pressed herself against that still body, and it took three paramedics to pry her away.

They took their tandem out on Saturday and rode up to the reservoir. It was warm for late October, but the mountains already had some snow. Up on the hills the cottonwoods were turning. Delicate things, those yellow leaves. They fluttered like paper wings. He was in front and Ruby in back, and they rode together like a single person. He’d bought the bike ten years before as their first anniversary present. He told her when there were bumps and when to ring the bell, and there were other couples, too, in matching bike shorts and tunics. Seven thousand feet above sea level with a sky so bright it hurt his eyes. “Look at that,” Ruby was saying. “Look at the baby deer,” and it came near the road and tilted its head and its mother was there beside it. Past barns that had lost their rooftops and cabins set back from the road and he could see the water in the distance. So blue it was almost black. Ruby once said they lived in the perfect place. Winters need to be cold and the summers hot, and the seasons give life its rhythm.

They found a shady spot and ate their turkey sandwiches. She’d put in chips and horseradish, and his eyes watered from the sting. She climbed on a rock when she was done with her meal. She pulled her knees close to her chest. “Maybe this will be your medicine,” she said. “Just coming up here the two of us and sitting in the sun.” Her nose
was sunburnt, and she worked her jaw the way she did to keep from crying. He wanted to climb up beside her on the rock, but there was only room for one.

**Good evening good night turn off the light. Sleep with the roses and rabbits tonight.** She strung the blossoms and her hands were white. A lady bug crawled across her cheek. There were more on the blanket, mounds of them moving in circles between the flowers. You’ll wake up tomorrow if God wants you to. Open your eyes and the sky will be blue. She reached for his wrist with those long fingers. It was time to show him the water. Her baby girl was waiting beside the rocks. Her skin was cool despite the heat, but he pulled his hand away. He didn’t want her to stop her singing. There’s no hurry, she said. I’ve got nothing here but time. She closed her dark eyes and sang to him like a mother. She rocked him in her arms.

**He saw a lady at the gym with an Ankh tattoo at the nape of her neck.** She was always there no matter when he went. Her black hair was shaved close to her head, and she never smiled or talked. She worked in with him on the machines sometimes. A slender woman with narrow fingers, but she lifted more than most guys and once he saw her do handstand pushups against the mirror. The lady with the tattoo and the two gay guys who were serious about their sets, the grandma who wore orange lipstick when she worked with her personal trainer. He knew them all and nobody ever said hello, and that was how he liked it. He varied his routine to keep his muscles guessing. Push-ups on the bozu ball. Three sets of twenty with claps in between and he felt the stabbing in his shoulder blades before he was halfway through. Crabwalking across the gym’s basketball court, one-legged squats, nine minutes jumping rope. One thousand three hundred and fifty jumps, and his knees popped sometimes from the strain. Pushups with his arms extended. Fingertip pushups when he felt strong, or pushups on one hand. Straight-jacket situps with his arms hugged tight across his chest. Sometimes he could see his heart beating through his wet T-shirt. Who knew what kept it going?

**Her hair had been long just like her daughter’s. Her eyes were almost black.** She carried a backpack, and it had red ladybugs stitched across it and a button that said Marisa. She cradled that bag in her arms, and she didn’t look around the room, not at him or the nurses or the police officers who were still taking down notes. His lawyer was
coming. Sid Taborsky from the firm who knew all about backdated stock options and Medicare fraud and Sid was useless because the girl was dead and nothing mattered now. The woman stood alone in the corner. Her older girl wasn’t there, and neither was her husband if she had one. She didn’t look up when the doctors came and when they told her the news. She didn’t cry, and she didn’t move. My baby’s not dead, she said. My baby’s right here, and she held that bag when she went to her knees. She held it against her chest, and he looked at the oval of her face and those long white fingers and he almost believed her.

The corporate folks needed him in Chicago for three days. He had to hold some hands in person and not just over the phone. One of the equity holders in a subsidiary was having doubts about the deal. He wanted more changes to the disclosure schedule or he’d pull out and everyone would be left hanging. “Be careful with those guys,” they told him the day before he left. “Spellman’s a screamer. I saw him break a keyboard once when things didn’t go his way.” The next day he’d give away bottles of Oban scotch if he’d really crossed the line. That was his way of saying sorry.

Ruby helped pack his bags. She had the shaving kit ready, and she folded all his shirts, and she took him to the airport, too, so he wouldn’t have to park. “Don’t look so worried,” she said when she stopped in front of the terminal. “I’ll call you every morning. I’ll wake you up just like I do at home.” She grabbed his arm before he walked inside. “Make a muscle,” she said. She leaned out the window to give him a kiss, and she looked so sweet with her eyes closed.

A bench with the girl’s name at the Franklin School and a willow tree planted in her honor. Ruby arranged these things. Sid Taborsky worked out the settlement and the no contest plea. Funeral and medical costs and the loss of future earnings. A year without a driver’s license and fifty thousand dollars restitution, and none of it was enough. He wrote a letter to the mother and to the sister. It said how sorry he was and how he thought of them every day, and Ruby said he should meet them in person and ask for forgiveness. She said it would make it easier to forgive himself and maybe she was right. He dialed the number a dozen times but hung up before it rang.

He’d dreamt those first months of falling. He jumped from a plane and his chute wouldn’t open. He was climbing rocks and they were
slick from the rain. He fell from windows and bridges and balconies, and he opened his arms the way divers do. He arced backwards in the air. These thoughts calmed him. He walked at night, going as far as Prospect Lake where people kept pit bulls behind their fences. He stopped carrying his pocket knife or his can of pepper spray and he waited for something to happen, but nothing ever did.

Ruby said we have choices, each of us. You have a choice just like your father did. He chose to smoke those cigarettes and to skip those doctor’s appointments. Don’t you make the same mistake. He needed to do something good with the time he had. He owed it to himself and to that little girl, and it was easy for her to say that, his sweet Ruby whose plants were always blooming. Who took yoga every Thursday at the courthouse gym. Who went to visit his father those last few months. She’d tried to get Ethan to come along, but he always found a reason not to. Tip her over and she’d right herself. How could she understand? Sometimes he was so tired. Every day he was treading water and he wanted only to stop.

He took a cab from the airport straight to the Chicago office. Twenty-six miles east on the I-90 to Jackson and Wacker and the cabbie listened to accordion music the whole way and never said a word. The meeting was in a conference room with views toward the water. It had already started when he got there. It had been going on all morning. There were white orchids on the table and stacks of tabbed papers. Danishes from breakfast with dried out jelly centers. They argued about disclosure first and then Spellman wanted to know who’d pay the taxes. Ethan tried to explain how there wouldn’t be any taxes, not the way this deal was structured, but Spellman was getting worked up. He scratched his bald head and pounded the table. “Of course it matters,” Spellman said. “You can’t tell me for certain how things will go. Eight hundred dollars an hour and you’re just guessing here,” and Spellman’s eyes popped the way those stress dolls do when you squeeze them. They needed some language to look at. They needed a draft tonight for their nine o’clock call. Hypothetical taxes and disregarded entities and Revenue Ruling 99–6. These things made him tired. Ethan moved his feet in circles beneath the table and kneaded the meat of his palms. All this sitting would give him a clot.

They took a break at two, and Ethan rolled his suitcase over to the hotel. The street was filled with construction crews. Men and a few women in yellow gear and muddy boots stood in line at the food trucks, and they ate hot dogs and gyro sandwiches standing up. A crew was
laying rebar in the empty lot across the street. They tied it in places and walked along its length. Easy as gymnasts working the beam. It wasn’t even thirty degrees out and the wind blew hard from the lake, but they didn’t seem to mind. The buildings rose around them like cathedrals, and they were building another. It would last for two hundred years. He walked past them with his laptop and his suitcase, and all those winters in Colorado didn’t prepare him for the wind. It was sharp as a blade how it worked its way through his coat. He pushed his collar up and kept on walking. Everywhere he looked there were cranes. Did they know how lucky they were—those men who worked in concrete and steel and big slabs of marble, the welders and the brick layers and the pipe insulation guys? They made things with their hands.

A group of kids walked past him with their teachers. On their way back from one of the museums probably. They wore nametags around their necks, and some of them carried pinwheels and held them high so the wind could turn them. They ran and pushed each other when the teachers weren’t looking. The buses were waiting at the corner. The doors were already open and the kids ran up the steps.

He set up his laptop when he got to the room. He unpacked his dress shirts and hung them in the bathroom. He turned the hot water on in the shower so the steam could work out some of the wrinkles. The room looked out onto a courtyard, and across the courtyard there was another tower with silver-colored windows. Sea birds flew over the buildings. They were probably five feet across with their wings open. Heading south to where the ocean was warm. The water wouldn’t freeze where they were going. The air was always mild. He closed the curtains and the room went dark. They kept out every trace of the afternoon sun. The room looked like every other room in the hotel, and the hotels all looked the same, too, from one city to the next.

He needed to look at the latest redline. They wanted the language before their call tonight. He should set up his alarm clocks before he forgot, but he was tired from the flight and from sitting in that room. He was tired from not exerting himself and he lay back against the pillows. Ruby had packed his toiletries, and she’d set some butterscotch candies inside his bag because they were his favorite. He unwrapped a candy and then another. He fell asleep to that sweet taste.

It was warm in the city. The air was still and the water, too, and the moon touched everything with silver. She took him by the wrist. Her hair was wet and coiled down her bare shoulders. He heard
crickets and frogs and the slapping sound of water. He knew the route. The black lava rocks and the trees and the sand where it curved. The stars in their strange patterns. It’s time, the woman said. Her skin smelled like vinegar and roses. The girl was already there, just a little farther along the shore. Her face had no marks and her dress wasn’t torn, and she moved with her mother’s grace.

It was time to take the ferry. Time to go into that water and nothing would hurt him there. The wind would never blow. He took off his shoes and let the waves wash his feet. The woman squeezed his hand. He looked into those dark eyes, but he found no mercy there. She pulled, and he stayed where he was. Her grip was strong as any man’s. No more winters where he was going. He could set his burdens down. A fisherman dragged his basket along the sand. It was full with octopus and strange curling things, and he beat them against the rocks. His arm stabbed downwards through the air. All around them things were blooming and bursting and falling to rot. It smelled like Ruby’s greenhouse. The woman pulled again and her face was angry.

I’m sorry, Ethan said.

He needed to remember what he’d done. Ruby said he should remember it and make amends but set aside the pain. It was the seed and the pearl would grow around it, and he didn’t deserve her. She talked to him sometimes just as he fell asleep. She whispered in his ear. It won’t happen from one day to the next. It was a journey, and she said the same tired things that counselors everywhere said to drug addicts and gamblers and compulsive overeaters. One step and then another. Her fingers were gentle against his cheek.

The woman pulled harder and Ethan pulled back. Her lips curled back from her teeth. He felt himself rising and he didn’t know why. Ficus trees grew in the city and morning glories covered them. Everything was heavy with growing vines. He rose above these things. Above the water rolling against the sand. Rolling and falling back and he was over the treetops and he saw the woman and the girl farther down. Sweet girl walking into the water. God forgive him what he’d done. Above them and the fishermen tending their boats and the air was cool again and Ruby was calling his name. Only you can save yourself, Ruby always said, but she was wrong. She saved him every day. She saved him by singing in that awful voice and by opening the blinds. Her voice pulled him upwards and he wasn’t afraid. Above the city and its cathedrals. Above the sand and the dark water, and he needed to thank her.
Catherine Anderson

The Men Wore Hats

Snow melts from rooftops, ledges, falls in sheets until all that remains—

the memory of snow.  
And what is memory? Our bodies

(including, perhaps, the brain) a constellation of molecules sloughed every

seven years until what’s left, not even a neurologist can tell.

My hand, the one I’ve always known, with its curved palm, and blunt,

wide-faced thumb, not the hand my father held while we walked down

Woodward Avenue fifty years ago.  
The men wore hats, and touched them, lightly.

My father replied just as quick, “Good morning to you, sir.”

None of those men knew my father.  
What they saw was a man in a hat walking

with a five-year-old girl in a velveteen coat.  
This spring, I’ve felt an early thaw, the gritty hump

banking the drive at first smaller, then gone, the way years later parts of ourselves
have completely vanished—our hands,  
our skin, our eyes. I am, in essence, snow.

And my father’s felt hat saved in a cardboard box,  
hat stamped Hudson’s, Detroit, hat

with its striped band, more permanent  
than my hand that once met his on a downtown street,

more lasting than my heart, or my eyes,  
or the labyrinthine brain cells carrying this scene.
Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves

A painting by James Ensor, 1889

An honor for the word schizophrenia to appear in the company of so many worthy terms on the right-hand page of my dictionary, especially the word schist that sounds exactly like what it is, a coarse-grained rock of quartz and mica layers set parallel to each other, or the versatile schizocarp, a dry seed split on maturity into two leafy, fruit-like carpels (think carrot), each containing a seed. Such beauty in utility, this seed and stone, hopscotched entries below scherzo, that leap-for-joy

Italian term of music, to the left of schlimazel, schmuck, and schnook, three Yiddish words describing variations of stupidity that could be expressed,

I’ve always thought, by one person. In Ensor’s painting, two skeletons are watched over by a third hovering at the door, an eavesdropper dressed in pink. Each skeleton a grinning,

high-cheek-boned version of any one of us, alike as we are in the bones after death. One wears a top hat and cape to warm by the stove pipe, while another stokes the red coals. Others, mere skulls,
sans cape, sans robe, roll around the darkened room.
How lonely schizophrenia would be without
its neighbor of shared origin, the schizopod,
a shrimplike creature once clustered under

the single order Schizopoda, meaning “split-footed ones.”
How lost schizophrenia would be without that distant fellow
up the page, the Flemish schipperke, a small dog
with a thick black coat, trained to keep watch on boats.
The Corner

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty…
—Walt Whitman

Morning opens to radio chatter, a shattered math
of money & polls, glazed barbiturate

of the cold American north, what I hear approaching
the corner where a woman named Adhima,

beloved daughter of Mohaned and Raquia,
has tied the golden veil of her nature ’round her head

to walk the lime-bedded streets among the multitude,
the buskers, the morning mendicants, her hijab

a swirl of scarlet, fingers hennaed from yesterday’s Eid
and end of Ramadan, a refugee who had arrived with nothing

but her wits when I first met her shivering under a yellow
blanket thin as a towel, a day when, thankfully, the Xeroxed flyer

on how to make a child’s winter jacket from newspaper—scissor
a semi-circle at the fold, then tape the edges—had been burned

for trash years ago along with a hundred other bad ideas
from that fuel-starved, plastic-sealed-window era.

At the immigrant center, I handed her a church-donated coat
billowy with polyfiber, realizing full well I’d wake up warm

in my own fondled bed while the last oil reserves of the world
burned low or burned out, I wouldn’t know, groggy but upright
on a morning like this one, the sun a silken star—
eternal, immovable, as I sip coffee one stoplight after the other,
driving by the intersection Adhima now passes through,
her white breath spinning spirals & minarets against
the morning’s violet, *soft-born measureless light.*
Derrick Austin

What the Living Say about the Dead

After Kurt’s funeral we return
to the kitchen, the porches, the living room—
Etta James growls on the turntable.
My father’s family slams dominoes,
harder and faster, to remind everyone
who’s the best, to remind themselves
it’s just a game. They shoo the kids away.
Too much smoke. Too much dirty talk.

The tears may return. We remember
when Kurt cast a fishing rod too far back
and hooked his calf. How he missed
court dates. How he wasn’t a jackass.
An uncle curls on the couch, reeling
from greens and catfish. *Pepto and prayer*,
Auntie suggests, rejoining us for gossip.
I’ve known that pain, taking in too much,
guts inflamed, as if the body hoarded pain,
unable to give in and release. Gin fortifies
our blood. We shore ourselves against the night
with stories of family only the oldest know
by face. Dominoes clatter. The kids
raise each tiny slab, crying out
when one collapses. Rows and rows
of white stones passing through their hands.
Jasmine V. Bailey

The Heaven of Poets

*after Dickey*

Your brother is not there. He’s gone
to the Heaven of Athletes, starting on the lacrosse team
beside his son, the center. They are the same age.
His wife is with them, her balance outrageous,
beam routine performed in mid-air.
Her limbs reach unfathomably.

Your mother passes through occasionally
carrying rosemary: the peripheries of Heaven
are always troubled with mothers. There
is Virgil’s mother, dressing olives.
Mrs. Berryman has picked up someone
at one of the many bars. They keep glancing
at their children, looking like saints.

There’s a trout stream full of intelligent fish
who elude the hooks of those who love money.
Sometimes you find your father on shore,
taking a break with a coke and pretzels,
hypothesizing about the hatch. He has
a place here—still, this heaven is not for families.

Usually you sit at wrought-iron outdoor tables
where no one pays for drinks.
Everyone orders bourbon; the waitresses
have forgotten how to spell anything else.
There are boisterous fights about Bowers
and accents grow stronger as the South is again
defended. No one in Heaven leaves Virginia.

Without sickness, the drunken poets stumble home
to tear at each other’s bodies, cheating on partners.
who do not bother about them. The nights are longer
to accommodate their mischief. When they wake,
heads seizing, bodies tangled, they stand
under a shower that may run years, their love

no different than it was on Earth, only now
they have the time they always needed
and were never promised, to observe water
coursing over the cherished skin, to name everything.
Shanan Ballam

The Letter I

Letters, like bone, have pretty marrow. Intimate, gritty

as a pearl, I glitters
in wet-dark solitude,

our mouths. I shines
its bright iris,

flits in the river,
glistening its fins.

I ache to hold
other letters,

cries, sometimes,
like we do

in the tender violence
of our singularity.
Wolf Wears Red Riding Hood’s Cape

When the story is silent behind its hard covers, Wolf slips into the cape, becomes a mind of clean wind.

His clumsy paws arrange delicate shawls around grandmother’s shoulders. Gently, he combs her thin hair.

A wonderful sadness washes through him when he wanders in fields glistening bluebells, their heads bowed in reverence.

He hears their soft prayers. For hours he labors with a paintbrush, watercolors, paints sunsets for grandmother, orange, purple, and gold.

She fastens his pictures high on her walls. He floats in a cold river, opens his eyes under water, feels the pure ecstasy of distortion.
Shanan Ballam

He sleeps next to grandmother.
In the dark she tells him of baby Moses
adrift in his tiny ark.
The Viewing

She curls into herself with Parkinson’s and age—head in hands, hair that won’t hold curl or color, a wisp of scarf around her neck so when she sways back and forth in her wheelchair at the head of the casket the air catches the silk to wave retreat. Her mouth open as she rocks from side to side, but her lament is as silent as it is deep. If any sounds came from those cracked lips, pulled into the loud O of sorrow, even the glassy saints in their windows might close their eyes at the glory of the sound.
Looking for the Front Move In

My jaw has taken on the stubborn, taut complaint of a too-tight hinge. Only the doctor can hear the nearly silent snip of bone, the click of resistance between bone and cartilage, like the click of high heels on the polished stone of the narthex. I think of stained glass windows, the organ, the church I have not been to for years: where I was married, where everyone was buried, where my father held the marble pulpit with both hands, gesturing into the dark Sunday. I think of all the people I have not seen since then, a congregation gathered around our dinner table every night. None of this I miss.

Though there was the music. How it produced such faith—we swelled with belief when the choir opened their mouths, the cathedral swallowing our thousand voices. My jaw still catches when I open it; I pray sound comes this time.
Tom Danlan, in a blue suit and dress shoes, cries in a strip mine on a Wednesday night. Suit and shoes both are marked with muck, and his car, on the roadside below the steep heap he stands on and across a muddy ditch, is not visible under a sky lit only by constellations. East of him, some ways off is a dim glow above a faint horizon. Beckwith. Where the wake was. Where he’d grown up. Somehow the thought of it seems unbearable now, the flat orderly grid of its streets broken only by the river angling through it, its streetlamps three to a block, its railroad tracks and crossings, its autumn air and courthouse square and leafy parks. Turning, he peers into darkness. To the west, nothing but shades of black under the stars, low mounds in the foreground fronting the endless black prairie broken only where a light shines here and there in a remote farmyard. What this was, he thinks; all prairie, plowed to corn and bean fields, fenced for hog lots and beef pasture. Before the strip mines came.

Most of them quiet now, the easy to reach seams all played; some with the rusting hulks of giant drag lines still standing amid the mounds of clay and shale and sand like the mound he stood on now. Busy once, though, all sound and movement, as huge shovels gulped half a house of ground with each swing and drop until, forty feet down, they found the coal—energy itself, Danlan thinks, the compressed remnant of the life of the world three hundred million years before. In the stillness, he hears the faint whine of cars on the interstate, two miles away behind the low hills of mine waste, and one close, too, coming nearer. From back toward town a pair of headlights is working its way along the two lane in his direction.

The word came from Olivia. A Monday email received at work, subject line Bad News, its message terse. Brian drowned yesterday. Terry’s taking it hard. Service probably on Thursday. Terry McConnell, his best hometown friend, the middle son of the family next door, a constant presence from kindergarten through high school, the best man at his wedding, just as he had been when Terry and Olivia had married. Brian, their second child and only son, Tom’s godson: sixteen,
E. Farrell

quiet and handsome, a near clone of Terry himself but for his mother’s red hair. Danlan numbly called directory assistance for the number he only had at home, noted it, and punched it in, repeatedly reaching only the incessant chirp of a busy signal. Finally, he had called Mary Koebrich, the dowager widow of the church he’d grown up in and the sure repository for all news and gossip.

“He drowned,” she said, “canoeing on the Middle Fork. With a girl but I can’t recall her name. You know, out there where it cuts through the mines. No, no, she’s all right. The wake is on Wednesday at Sullivan’s. No, dear, I don’t know what time. They’re going to have a funeral Mass on Thursday at St. Francis’.”

Danlan knew the river, the longest of the three branches of the Pontiac, named for the Ottawa chief who had very nearly driven the British from the western frontier. Its head waters were up near Sibley and it meandered for miles before dropping at the crossroads that once was Pennfield into the Beckwith pocket, the ancient glacial scraping that contoured a thirty-mile bowl around the town. There it picked up speed, surprising in an Illinois river, that made for a good run down through fields and parkland and mines in the ten miles north of its junction with the Salt Fork. In the last summers of high school he and Terry had paddled it often while a war heated up in Asia and demonstrations heated up at home, loading a battered aluminum canoe onto the roof of his grandfather’s Ford wagon, leaving Terry’s beater Chevelle where the forks came together and putting in below a rusted truss bridge west of where the wall of an empty gas station said Collison Auto Bod before the paint peeled into exposed brick. An old joke with them—need to get an autobod ASAP.

When was the last time? Maybe May of 1970, three weeks or so of high school left. Terry, shorter and lighter, had paddled at the bow, Tom at the stern. More than half way through the run, three miles to go, maybe less, the spring flow high, moving quickly, roiling silty water but no rocks in sight. Talking baseball, talking girls, talking college—or not talking at all as the wooded banks had slid by in the still cool air of a spring Saturday morning.

“Hey.” Danlan hears himself speaking at the top of a straight stretch where a fringe of greening trees gave way to a stubbly field.

“Hey what?”

“You got a birthday next week?” Terry had been born on the feast of St. Brendan the Voyager, and Brendan was his middle name. Somehow the boat brought that to consciousness.
“Yeah?”
“Selective Service time for you, brother.” It was on everyone’s mind, and shootings in Ohio had made that worse.
“Not gonna do it.” Just that. No more.
“What?”
“I’m not gonna do it.” A curve in the river coming up, Terry steering the canoe to the inside, where the water would usually be faster.
“You have to, man,” Tom had continued. “You don’t, it screws you up for financial aid.”
“That whole My Lai thing. I dunno—I don’t like it.”
“Hey, no one does. But you’re going to school—you’ll be 2-S anyway.”

No time for more.

The spill had happened quickly. Just past the turn the river split around a narrow woody island. A tree down into the channel, pushing hard for the gap at the bank but snagged on a submerged branch and over they went into a shock of cold water. Both gasping, Tom losing then catching his paddle again, Terry with presence of mind enough to swim for the boat, getting a hand on the gunwale before the next drop pulled it—and him—out of sight around the tip of the island.

Squishing down the bank in soaked sneakers, Tom caught up with Terry, the boat, and their waterlogged cooler a quarter mile downstream, resting in sunshine on a sandbar down a bluff from a cornfield. The second paddle was hung up on a snag three hundred yards further on. They had set out again laughing but where the river split into the strip mines, the heaped gray detritus formed a ravine deep enough to keep the sun off of them, and the wet chill of their clothes had pushed them quickly toward hypothermia. Terry, in particular, had been shivering and bluing at the lips.

“We’re gonna make it, man. Mile, mile and a half, that’s all.”
“C-c-c-cold.” Teeth chattering, shoulders visibly shaking.
“Push, man. Keep pushing.”

Terry had. At the take out, wrapped in a greasy blanket from the Chevelle’s trunk and still shuddering but smiling now, he offered, “It’s a cold world. C-cold.”

C-cold. How true, Tom thinks, watching the car slow down as its high beams find the back of his Outback. How cold for a man, a good one, to get a sheriff’s call at work, a voice he didn’t know saying, “There’s been an accident.”
And he was a good one, even back in the day. While the rest of them were content to ride their deferments until the draft ended, Terry had refused, registering as an objector, had spent two years as an orderly at a veteran’s hospital, cursed at as he emptied bedpans. Not preachy either; never said a word about it to anyone. Just put his head down and did it like that last cold mile and a half on the river. Shouldn’t there be some good karma for that? The car on the road is stopping now, pulled over behind Tom’s, headlights still on and the dome light coming on as the door swings open and a silhouette, a woman’s, appears.

“Tom?” The shout is surprisingly faint, perhaps dispersed on October’s light breeze, but he knows who it is.

“Ruth,” he calls. “Wait there.” Ruth Lafferty, now Knight, the girl he should have fallen for but never did.

“No!” Her voice louder now. “I’m coming up.”

She turns, pushes the car door closed, bends for a moment—Tom realizes she’s slipping her shoes off—and then she’s across the shoulder and lost for a moment in the ditch brush. One more glimpse as she starts up the steep slope before the headlight’s timer douses them, erasing her completely. Only sound then, her breathing punctuated by goddammits and laughter. At ten feet he picks up a shape but not until she’s right there, out of breath and holding his arm, does he actually see Ruth again.

“Goddam it,” she says again. “Most guys go sit on a beach somewhere when they’re blue but not Tom Danlan. He picks a goddam strip mine.”

“It’s the corn belt, Ruthie,” he answers, savoring her touch, catching her free hand in his. “We’re not too big on beaches here, remember? How’d you find me?”

“Terry. I saw you talking to him at the wake but I guess you didn’t spot me. He said he bet you’d be out here.”

“Out here’ covers a lot of ground.” Her hair, sweet and faintly lemony, the same now as thirty years before.

“True. But I’ve been here before. Remember? Talked about you and Terry, too.”

He did remember and was glad she did, too. A scorching August evening in 1969, two weeks before school started, sitting on the front porch, depressed. Over what? Dumped by his steady, that was the main thing. And scared. Looking back that was easier to see. The beginning of Senior year meant the end of something, too, and there was a stratum of fear under everything. No one to hang with—Terry away at his brother’s wedding some place out in New York. The weight
of an empty Saturday night lay on him like mile deep sludge until a red VW Beetle, Ruthie’s, pulled up at the curb.

“Hey, mope. What’s up?” Bright Ruthie smile, as always; short brown hair and big brown eyes.

“Not one damn thing.”

“ Heard about Mary Lynn.” Ruth not one to beat around the bush.

“She’s a friend but she’s stupid.”

“She can do what she wants. It’s a free country.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean she was stupid to move out of your pasture. That might be the one smart thing she’s ever done.” That smile again.

“I meant she’s, you know, stupid.”

“Thanks. That’s really cheering me up.”

“C’mon, Tom. Everyone knows you’re going someplace. Gonna go to college and never come back here.” Dead serious now; a little bit of fire behind the brown of her eyes. “Mary Lynn wants to get a job and a guy and a house and in a year or two she’ll start making babies. If that long. She wants someone who’ll work in the mines like her dad and her brothers. You don’t see that?” She had punched his arm. “I think you do and you’re just feeling sorry for yourself.”

Saying nothing because there was nothing to be said. He had known Ruth was telling the truth, even the last part.

“That’s what she wants, Tom.” Ruth sitting on the porch step beside him now. “What do you want?”

“No idea. I’ve got no idea. You?”


Danlan did not remember how they got to the mines. Probably a cruise downtown on Vermilion, then out Lincoln past the city limits and west on County 12. Five miles of fields before the moonscape—gray brown hills on either side of the road, the oldest ones weedy, the newest bare but not a tree in sight.

“Jesus, what a mess,” Ruth had said. “How much nothing can there be?”

“Not nothing. I mean, maybe not much but there’re surprises in there.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Roads. A stripping shovel a hundred and eighty feet tall. A lake so green you can’t believe it. An old farmhouse.”

“C’mon, there are not. You’re goofing me.”

“I’m not—there was this one guy wouldn’t sell so the mining company just mined all around him. The house is still in there. And
the shovel tipped in a pit and they couldn’t get it out of there. A Bucyrus Erie 1050B. You can still see the company slogan on it—*Digging The Past To Power The Present*. And the lake is green from some copper or something that was just below the coal—not rich enough to take out, I guess. Terry and me explored it when we were kids.”

“Show me.”

He had demurred. Too steep. Too muddy. Too easy to get lost. Ruthie wouldn’t hear it, though. Show me. They had left the car at a wide spot on the shoulder and slipped down through milkweed and loosestrife to a foot wide stream that stank of sulfur and decay, had jumped it, and started up the slope, gingerly pushing back brambles and poky raspberry canes when they could and swearing at the scratches when they couldn’t. Fifteen feet up the brush was gone and the bank steepened impossibly. Danlan had led her to a muddy gully to complete the climb. At the top, looking off the far side, they were facing square miles of identical barren gray hills. But below them was one of the roads Tom had promised, rolled clay and gravel, snaking through the mounds.

“Jesus,” Ruth beside him, face sweat-glistened, breathing hard, scent of lemon from her hair. “Jesus, I am *gross*.”

“Hey, you wanted to come.” She had been, in fact, a mess—legs and shorts streaked with mud, burrs colonizing her sleeveless blouse, an angry red scratch on her left arm. “You wanna go back?”

“Not till I see this emerald lake of yours.”

“It’s a ways.”

“I want to see it.”

Down the back side then, along the road, across another ditch and over another hill to where, as he had said, green water sparkled in the stark landscape. More scratches, more burrs, more streaked mud but Ruth smiling now.

“Look at me.” They had been sitting on a mud flat at the water’s edge. “I look like a damn mole or something.”

Tom had laughed. “Once when Terry and I were kids, we tried to dig a tunnel to China or somewhere. Ended up quite a bit like that.”

Ruthie chuckling. “Whose idea was that?”

“I don’t remember. We were ten, maybe eleven then. Some Saturday and there was just nothing to do. So we get this idea to dig a hole, and we grab some shovels out of my grandfather’s garage and head over to this little woods that used to be on Columbia Street where the eye doctor’s office is now, just up from Voorhees there, you know?”

She had nodded, watched him closely.
“We get in there out of sight and just start digging. Ended up with a hole about five feet down with a helluva big pile of dirt right next to it. Funny thing, why I remember it, was the next day, though.”

“So?” Ruth punching his arm. “C’mon, tell me.”

“Well, it rained Saturday night. I mean it poured. So on Sunday both of us are just curious as hell. What happened to our hole? After church, still in our good clothes and everything, we’re almost running to get over there.” Danlan had idly scratched curlicue designs in the dirt with a stick, scratched them out, tossed the stick in the water, and glanced around for another one.

“So what had happened to it? The hole?” Then her hand was on his forearm, fingers light, sliding down to his wrist.

“It was about half full of water. A lot of the dirt pile had slid back into it. And then I fell in.”

“No way!” Laughing out loud.

“Yes, way. I don’t know how, musta stumbled on a root or something, but I totally sprawled into that hole, just covered myself with muck, good shirt, good shoes, everything. And when I stood up in it I thought I was going to start to cry. But you know what Terry did?”

Ruth had shaken her head.

“He jumped in there with me. Ducked himself all the way in, too. And then he took a big handful of that oozy mud and dripped it down over my head and said I baptize you over and over.”

“He did not, you’re making that up!”

“No, he did. His nephew had just been christened about a week before that. I baptize you, I baptize you, I baptize you. And then I did it to him and we were laughing and the whole thing was just completely turned around. We got in huge trouble with our moms, huge—but it didn’t matter.”

Silence then. In a comfortable quiet, he and Ruth had sat in the August heat entranced by the green lake encircled by the gray hills under the evening blue bowl of the sky, the spell only broken when Ruth had suddenly stood up and kicked off her sandals.

“Let’s do it again,” she’d said, waving a hand toward the water.

“What? Do what?”

“Come on—I’ll christen you.” Moving toward the water then, leaving footprints in the firm mud.

“What are you doing? I don’t want to get my stuff all wet.”

“Still afraid that mommy will be mad?” she’d teased. “Well, fine.”

And then something extraordinary and unexpected—laughing, Ruthie had turned around, wriggled and pulled herself out of her
clothes, and run splashing into the green water. Standing at just less than chest height, her small breasts and nipples visible at the water line, she had called to him, “Coming?”

_Breathtaking._ Either the sight of her or the chill of the water on a hot day or both had him gasping by the time he’d swum out to where she stood, and now, in the dark on the hill, her hand still in his, Danlan feels his breath coming a little quicker.

“You baptized me,” he says, laughing quietly. “Why?”

“Can’t say what I was thinking at the time.” Her fingers squeeze his gently. “But now I’d say that if there was ever a moment when a man needed to be born again, it was that moment and you were that man.”

“Yeah, maybe so.” Danlan looks up to the sky, considers the stars, thinks of them wheeling through space toward who knew what limit, turns back to Ruth next to him. “Can you need that more than once?”

“It’s a hard time, isn’t it?” Ruth drops his hand, wraps her left arm around his waist, and tips her head against his shoulder.

“You know what Terry said to me? He said, ‘I didn’t deserve this.’” Stillness now, and the feel of a light breeze in his hair.

“You’re thinking about Joanne, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” His wife, gone fourteen months now. It felt good to hear her name. “It’s been more than a year but I still reach for her in bed when I wake up.”

Ruth does not comment. Which is just as well, Danlan thinks. Nothing more to say, really. In the distance, a truck shifts gears on the interstate, probably on the slope up out of the bowl, the same pitch he had descended on his drive in that afternoon.

_An old country song was on the radio, the Amazing Rhythm Aces—“Third Rate Romance (Low Rent Rendezvous).”_ Danlan remembered it from his early sales days, on the road all over the middle part of the state, not much to listen to but country music and farm reports unless you were in radio range of Urbana where the university was, moving from town to town and broker to broker to the sound of steel guitars and drawling voices. A country song kind of job, he thought, except you had to wear a tie. A nothing job, talking to people he didn’t know about a subject he didn’t care about just for a paycheck. What was that about? Paying the rent, he guessed, and saving for graduate school. And while he was doing that, Terry was sailing around the world, crewing a forty-five footer whose captain had the Magellan bug. Postcards and occasional
letters marked his progress—from Charleston, from Freeport, from San Juan and Montego Bay and Colón, then from Easter Island and Papeete and Honolulu—beacons of possibility beamed into country music land. In Hawaii, while Danlan was voyaging the byways of central Illinois, they had run low on money and Terry had returned to replenish funds by working oil barges in the Gulf of Mexico. He never got back. And now Brian was dead, and the Aces were singing about a guy trying to keep his courage up, and Danlan was dropping his Taurus down the slope to the Pontiac River bridge, wondering what words there were that he could possibly offer Terry at the wake.

“It’s almost pretty out here, isn’t it?” Sitting now, Danlan’s suit jacket spread on the ground, leaning together, Ruth tipping her head to the sky. “The stars, I mean. You could forget you’re sitting on a mud pile.”

“Hmmm.” Danlan letting thoughts tumble and spin, not trying to catch them. “Probably better not to, though.”

“Not to what?” She sits up, faces him in the darkness. “Not to sit in mud?”

“Not to forget.” Even as he speaks the words, he wonders what he means by them, fumbles for some significance, lets them go, nudges the woman next to him with his shoulder. “How come we never got together, Ruthie?”

She finds his hand on the jacket, rests her own on it lightly. “I was afraid.”

“C’mon—you must’ve known you had me cold. How could you have been afraid?”

“I wasn’t afraid I wouldn’t get you, Tom. I was afraid I would.”

“Jesus, Ruth. That stings.” Danlan begins to pull his hand away, stops, turns his head toward the highway.

Ruth laughs, a sound like music in the quiet of the night. “That did sound bad, didn’t it? Didn’t mean it that way, though. It’s just that it would have been so easy. You were always so comforting, so comfortable, y’know? That wasn’t what I needed then.”

“So comfortable’s a bad thing?”

“Sometimes. You think Terry was always comfortable on that boat?”

“Probably not.” One letter, from Easter Island, had reported a two-week siege of seasickness.

“But you’ve always admired him for it. Why?” She does not let him answer. “Because he was pushing the edges.”
No response. She’s right; Danlan knows it. He shakes his head and stretches, looks around in the dark. No edge to the night, he thinks. Stars and quiet going on forever. Ruth shifts next to him, sighs, laughs again, this time quietly.

“Terry told me a story about you two once. I was home to visit mom and it was one of those lovely fall days, must’ve been a year ago. Ran into him after church and we were chatting about nothing really—you know, family and the town and the weather—and he told me how you guys climbed the church tower.”

It would have been the weather that brought it to mind. That day had been as perfect as a picture on a calendar page—crisp clear air and sharp bright colors and the sweet smoky smell of leaves burning. They had been running, had just pelted Mrs. Morrison’s mean Rotweiler with fallen apples and were now bombing along Voorhees across Walnut and down alongside their church, St. Francis, a stuccoed mission-style knock off that was singularly out of place in central Illinois. At its side entrance Terry, then twelve, had abruptly stopped and pulled open the door. “Sanctuary, sanctuary!” he had shouted and had disappeared inside. (Both of them, Danlan recalls, had been reading *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* that year.)

Danlan had followed, entering a space that was at once familiar and strange. He had been to church there every Sunday for as long as he could remember and once a week for school masses as well but then the room was nearly full and alive with shifting and bustling and coughing and whispering. Now it was empty and dead silent, and the soft colored light through the stained glass caught dust motes drifting in the calm, wax-scented air. Both boys had stopped in the doorway. When Terry spoke, it was in a whisper. “Come on.”

What followed was exploration. They had moved quietly through the cry room, down the curved apse passage behind the altar, had inspected the empty sacristy and the uncharted territory of the priest’s confessional booth, had examined close up the grotesque carvings of the Stations of the Cross in the nave. Finally Terry had led him tiptoeing up the narrow staircase that led to the choir loft from the narthex just inside the massive wooden doors of the main entrance. At the top, they had stopped; neither had been there before. Finally, they had crept by the huge organ with its soaring pipes and cockpit console and had stood in silence at the rail, peering into the stillness of the church as though searching for something missing there, something there that
wasn’t. When Terry had turned to go, he’d stopped and clutched at Tom’s arm.

“Look at that!”

In a nook on the far side of the organ cabinery, a ladder led fifteen feet up to a trap door in the ceiling. Terry had been the first to climb; Tom, afraid of heights, had held his breath and clung to each rung. The trap door lifted into a dark dirty space with an acrid smell of pigeon droppings and old dust. Across this room an even longer ladder rose perhaps twenty-five feet to a rectangle of light. Terry had been on it and moving up before Tom’s eyes had even adjusted to the dim light.

“This is great!” he had called from the top.

The ascent was excruciating. Heart pounding, Danlan glued his eyes aloft, and had moved first one foot and then the other onto each round bar. Toward the top, the ladder swayed slightly and Danlan had nearly frozen. Only Terry’s smile appearing in the rectangle had drawn him on. Coming into the light, Terry had grabbed his hand and pulled him up.

Terry was right—the view was incredible. They had been higher up than all but the tallest trees, and the prospect was nearly complete, obstructed slightly to the south where the tower’s twin rose above the church’s tiled roof. Beyond that, only the Walton Hotel downtown and the elevators of the Hoffman grain complex further away competed for the skyscape. From their perch, their houses across the street were small, two squares in a quilt of rooftops stretched away toward the north and west among oaks and maples and ash and redbud trees, a panoply of red and orange and gold below a sapphire blue sky. The world had been bigger, and they were bigger, too.

In the strip mine, Danlan smiles at the memory. “There was power in that.”

“Terry said that, too. Said it was like being God.” Ruth patted his hand lightly. “Laughed when he said it, though. Said that really you were only looking at something you already knew but were thinking it was some kind of revelation.”

“That’s true, sort of. But sometimes a change of perspective is a revelation.” Closing his eyes for a moment, opening them again to the stars. “Terry knew that. Look what happened after the accident.”

“What accident? You mean Brian?”

“No, his own. When he came back from Hawaii.”

“Did I miss this? Maybe when I was in New York?”

A note of alarm in her voice that seemed out of place to Danlan, a
ghost of something or someone not present. “Could be. I’m surprised your mother wouldn’t have heard it on the church grapevine, though.”

“Probably she did. Jesus, I was a mess then.” In the ensuing silence, Danlan remembers hearing that she’d fallen apart for a while—alcohol, drugs, something. Finally, Ruth speaks again. “Anyway, what happened?”

“Terry was working for an oil company in the Gulf that year, crewing on a barge. A cable snapped and whipped across his leg. Almost severed it. They evacuated him on a helicopter to Tampico and the docs there wanted to amputate. Olivia went down there and just would not let that happen. Terry said she was like a force of nature. Before that, he hadn’t seen her much for months. Told me he thought of her as the girl back home but not more. But while all this was going on he wrote me a card that said, ‘May lose a leg, but I think I’ll gain a wife.’ Tell me that’s not a change in perspective.”

“Jesus.”

It was, Tom thinks, a lovely story. But not every story ended so happily. Brian was dead and that ending would not change.

The wake was awful. Young friends of Brian crying, his girlfriend nearly hysterical, Olivia looking crushed. Survivors of a disaster, Tom thought. A goddammed country and western song come true. Only Terry seemed to be functioning at all, accepting hugs and handshakes, speaking quietly, always composed. Danlan searched as the line of mourners worked its way slowly closer to the family, searched for familiar faces in the crowd, searched his mind for comforting words. And came up empty. No one there he knew, nothing he could say.

As it happened, it didn’t matter. When Terry noticed him at the front of the line, he and Olivia had simply wrapped themselves around him in a wordless, crying embrace.

The only words that came were, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

At length, Terry stepped back, fixed a wry, sad look on him, shook his head. “We didn’t deserve this,” he said. “None of it.”

“No.” Danlan felt some inner bottom falling out. “No, you didn’t.”

The person behind him stepped up, and Tom moved to the casket and knelt. There was a waxen Brian there, hands folded, eyes closed, red hair neatly combed as it never was in life. Danlan remembered his christening in the same church that he and Terry had explored, a tiny being, swathed in brightest white, eyes closed then, too, sound asleep in his father’s arms. Terry, considering his son, twelve days old, had said, “And I thought sailing was wonderful.” But the memory will not hold.

E. Farrell
In the funeral home at the casket, Tom heard an echo of “We didn’t deserve this” and fled.

“Tom, if I ask you something, will you tell me?” Ruth is leaning back on her elbows, her knees up in front of her, her shape barely visible under the night sky.

“Sure, Ruthie. What?”

“Back then…you know…was I…was I beautiful?”

Danlan can barely see her in the coal dark night. “Sure you were. You still are.”

He sits through a long moment of silence before she says, “Maybe. But back then I felt it. Not now. It’s been a long time since I felt beautiful.”

Neither of them speaks. For a time there seems to be no sound at all: no highway whine, no breeze, not even the soughing of their breath. At last, Tom quietly asks, “What happened, Ruth?”

He thinks she is shaking her head as she leans forward and wraps her arms around her knees. Her answer when it comes is addressed not to him but to the empty mine in front of them. “Out east…it started out so well but then…then, you know…I don’t know…it was like I was in this really ugly dream and finally I woke up. I woke up…but the ugliness has just never washed off.”

Ruth is sobbing softly now. Without thinking, Danlan spits on the fingertips of his right hand, reaches toward her with his left.

“Ruthie?” Touching her right cheek, he turns her face toward him, moistens his right thumb, lifts his hand toward her. “You did this for me once. Now I baptize you.”

While she sits under stars in a strip mine, Danlan traces a cross on her forehead.

The church is packed for the funeral. Always what happens when a young person dies, Danlan thinks. Light streams through the windows; the day is almost glorious. Next to him, Ruth stands with her hands clasped together, eyes down, listening as the priest intones a prayer at the casket.

“We seem to give him back to you, dear God, who gave him to us. Yet, as you did not lose him in giving, so we have not lost him by his return. Not as the world gives, do you give, O Lover of souls! What you give, you do not take away. For what is yours is ours always, if we are yours.” For no reason, Danlan thinks of last night’s stars and of sliding and not falling with Ruth down the steep slope to the road. Not falling.
“And life is eternal,” the priest is saying, “and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, O God, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; draw us closer to you, that we may know ourselves nearer to our beloved who is with you. And while your Son prepares a place for us, prepare us for that happy place, that, where they are and you are, we may be, too. Amen.”

As they repeat the Amen the congregation sits and looks toward the casket expectantly; the homily is next, and the program says that Terry McConnell will give it. Ruth is leaning forward, elbows on thighs, chin resting on her folded hands. Now Terry stands at the head of the aisle, shaking a little but somehow managing a smile. He thanks the congregation for coming, describes how much it means to Olivia and him and their family, pauses for a deep breath, says, “I said to my friend Tom yesterday that we didn’t deserve this.”

The church is quiet as Terry struggles to collect himself, and Danlan thinks of standing at the choir loft rail on a long gone autumn afternoon, looking down on the silent pews and empty chancel, wrapped in stillness. But not quite empty. Something there that wasn’t.

“We did not deserve this,” Terry says again. “Not any of it, my friends. Not this pain, not these many years of joy. We don’t deserve any of it. Every life is a gift.”

Terry is crying now. Tears streak his cheeks but still that smile. Danlan remembers the shaky ladder in the tower, the hand pulling him into the light, the bigness of the world.

“A gift.” Terry turns, looks at the altar, nods to the priest, considers the casket. “What I want to say…” He turns back to the nave. “What I want us all to say...is thank you.”

Tom closes his eyes, feels Ruth’s hand touch his arm, thinks of the tower again, and imagines being lifted, seeing beyond the horizon. Two boys are there, covered with mud, and then a girl, almost a woman, standing beautifully in impossibly green water, and somewhere beyond that a huge shovel stripping coal, and a woman curled in blankets on the far side of a bed, and a young man in this church holding a sleeping baby. Where they are and you are, he thinks. Already there. Thank you.
Rachel Furey

Calls That Carry for Miles

The stuttering bullfrog calls from the far side of the creek again, its throat billowing into a brilliant balloon, its call trilling and then sticking, trilling and then sticking—a ruuum interrupted by short pauses. Rebecca is drawn to the frog, despite the rain that has now started to fall, urging most of her sixth grade class back inside, where they will spend the rest of recess playing checkers or Connect Four. While a group of boys start up a football game in the rain, she slips down the small bank behind the schoolyard and sits on a boulder beside the creek bed. She pulls out the index cards tucked into the waistband of her skirt and smoothes over their wrinkled corners, bending over the cards in an attempt to keep the rain from spotting them. She tucks one ankle over the other, straightens her back, clears her throat, then starts in on the speech she must give to her class in less than an hour.

Rebecca speaks slowly, rubbing one of her shoes across the softening ground. Last night, she went through and crossed out some of the words that contained the letter r, a letter that gives Rebecca such extreme trouble that Mrs. Ruth keeps her after school to repeat words like “rabbit,” “raccoon,” and “ring.” Sometimes Mrs. Ruth makes Rebecca say the name of what it is she has, what it is that makes it so that she cannot pronounce her r’s, a thing called “rhotacism,” which is entirely unfair because if you have something that prevents you from speaking correctly, you ought to at least be able to say what it is that you have.

Rebecca got rid of plenty of the r words in her speech, but there were plenty she had to keep, and she really couldn’t do without the word “frog.” She takes this word slowly now. It’s not so bad. The f before the r makes it easier going. It’s like when Mrs. Ruth puts all the easy spelling words before the hard ones. She can’t feel the eyes of her classmates on her and without Mrs. Ruth standing over her, the smell of her rosemary perfume tickling her nose, Rebecca pulls the words up from her toes and gives her speech to that bullfrog still trilling on, to the green frogs that have now risen in the rain, bobbing in the slowly moving current.
Their large eyes—large enough it seems they can take in the entire world at once—glimmer and lend a new texture to the creek’s surface.

The rain picks up, and the drops find their way onto Rebecca’s note cards. She tucks the index cards back into the waistband of her skirt and continues on without them. The green frogs call right along with her, punctuating the soft patter of the rain. Rebecca pushes her voice to prevail over all the noises—the rain, the frogs, the boys’ cheers and grunts as they play football. She trips over frog a couple times and keeps in mind that bullfrog is still calling away.

That bullfrog is calling low and deep, stuttering so bravely along, and Rebecca is nearly to the part of her speech in which she comments on the frog’s determination, when the football topples over the bank and begins to roll toward Rebecca. She pulls her knees into her chest and slips the edges of her skirt beneath her bottom. She’s wearing the best skirt she has—the navy blue one with the small yellow flowers, the one her father usually makes her save for church.

A rock the size of a marble hits Rebecca in the thigh and she gazes up the bank to find Billy Dward looking back at her. He’s the biggest kid in the sixth grade, has been held back at least twice. There is a gap between where his pants end and his socks start. His stomach slips out over his jeans, pulling his shirt taut. Billy has stayed after school with Rebecca plenty of times, both of them practicing their words. Rebecca thinks he can’t speak because his tongue is too fat and his front teeth too large, too crooked. He’ll never be able to afford braces the way the parents of the girls sitting in the front row can. He has a hard time with long words that have more than one syllable, but even though Rebecca doesn’t understand him half the time, the way his eyes narrow and his buck teeth hammer against his lower lip is enough to send a sharp shiver down her spine. He points to the football slowly rolling toward the creek while his teeth continue to hammer up and down.

Rebecca has a guess as to what he’s saying, but she’s not sure. She stands, but doesn’t get to the ball in time. It glides into the creek and begins to drift away, prompting several frogs to dive beneath the surface of the water. Their calls stop, only the bullfrog continuing on.

Billy’s lips flutter and he scampers down the bank as quickly as he can get his round body to move. Pieces of slate slide out from beneath the soles of his sneakers and roll toward Rebecca, who takes a seat on the boulder, once again pulling her knees into her chest.

He leans an arm on her rock, out of breath, panting hot air at her. He reaches up a dirty hand and grabs the edge of her skirt. He balls it
up in his palm. Billy gives the skirt a yank and the fabric stretches and tears. One of those yellow flowers gets torn clear down the middle. She pushes her palms against her knees, trying to hold the rest of the skirt in place. He takes a step toward the creek, and then opens his hand. He lets the piece of the skirt slowly sift toward the water. It hits the surface and then drifts away. Billy smiles, his teeth yellowed and crooked, and then puts a hand on the back of Rebecca’s neck. The hand is rough and hot and it makes her nauseous. He squeezes until she curls her fingers into fists with the pain. She stares at the bullfrog on the other side of the creek, its throat billowing in and out. She stares at it until a small green frog emerges from the creek, hopping ashore in large leaps, and she makes the mistake of glancing down at it.

Billy follows her gaze and releases his grip on her neck long enough to bend and scoop up the frog that decides to play dead when it really should have hopped away as quickly as it could have. He squeezes it in his left hand and the eyes get that glow to them, the one they get every time he’s about to knock something down a notch. Billy has never killed anything. He just likes leaving it different, as if to say, now you and me are even, now we both have this terrible thing we’ll have to overcome. His lips shuffle, squirming like fat caterpillars across his teeth. Rebecca thinks she catches the word frog, the word like, but can’t be sure. He smiles at her and then at the frog.

She doesn’t move. She urges the frog to flail its limbs more strongly, to hop away.

Billy dips his right hand into his back pocket and comes up with his Swiss army knife. He flicks open the rusty blade and smiles over at Rebecca, who isn’t up from the rock quickly enough to stop him from forcing that blade through one of the frog’s back legs. It catches a little on tendon and then bone, and a liquid not quite the color of Rebecca’s own blood drips from Billy’s hand. He grits his teeth together and gives the blade another push before the limb finally falls to the ground with a small thump. He squeezes the frog in his hand, the remaining back leg twitching like crazy, and then slowly lowers it to the ground, where the frog aims for a hop, but instead drives its head into the dirt that is now turning to mud.

Billy stammers, says something about time, something about getting used to. He stomps his foot in a way that means he is proud of himself. Rebecca squeezes her hands together and knows that tonight when she bends before her mattress and says her nightly prayers, she will have to add one for this frog. The creature takes a few more leaps that land its
head in mud and then finally crosses over into the creek where it floats, one back leg out behind it, the other missing, save a slender trail of tendon and skin. She waits for the frog to call with all the others, to prove that a missing leg doesn’t damage a throat. But the frog just floats.

The sound of the whistle, the one being blown by Mrs. Ruth, a teacher so ancient it’s a wonder she still has air enough to blow the whistle at all, drifts down to them and Billy wipes his knife on the side of his jeans, replaces it in his back pocket, then leans in for one last whisper—something about the football, something about next time. He scuttles up the bank.

Rebecca picks up the frog’s lost leg, a light slimy thing, and then tosses it into the creek, letting the current carry it away. She curls her fingers around the trunk of a birch tree, dragging herself up the bank that is growing muddier with the rain. Her shoes slide a little, collecting mud on the sides, and when she gets to the slick grass, she wipes her shoes in the blades until they shine black again.

The back of the classroom is drafty, but Rebecca sits there anyway because she doesn’t like everyone watching her and would much rather have it the other way around. All of her is wet from the soft rain, and she rubs her arms and tries to get the goose bumps to sink back down into her skin.

Mrs. Ruth clears her throat and stares the class down. She’s the smallest woman Rebecca knows, but also the only one who can make goose bumps simultaneously rise along Rebecca’s entire body. Mrs. Ruth runs a hand through her gray hair, then pushes her thick glasses up onto her nose. “We’re sharing speeches today. But I didn’t have to tell you that. You’ve been preparing. Remember that your voice needs to get itself all the way to the back of the classroom. Remember that you need to stand up straight and pull the words from your diaphragm.” Mrs. Ruth falls back into her chair, tucking one tiny leg over the other.

Rebecca can’t find any meaning in the word “diaphragm” because she has never seen a picture. She merely thinks of it as something magical, something located on just the other side of her belly button. She’s almost sure hers is faulty and that is why her words never come out quite right.

Molly Ann gives her speech first. It’s about her mother and how nice she is, the gorgeous quilts she sews and then sells for hundreds of dollars. Molly Ann must have a good diaphragm because her words
carry to the back of the classroom no problem at all. Amanda stayed in to play checkers and doesn’t shake at all when starting her speech, but Mrs. Ruth cuts her off partway through, when her speech drifts away from the dreams she has at night and into what she found her parents doing one night when she went to their door. Simon talks about the raccoons that sneak under his porch at night and how his daddy finally had had enough and shot them to pieces one night under a full moon. Dustin says there’s not much for him to tell at all because just last year he was in a car accident that made him lose his memory. His speech is so short he doesn’t leave himself any room for messing up.

When it’s Rebecca’s turn, she spins her skirt so that the missing piece hangs in the back. She stands in the front of the classroom, her fingers sweating so heavily they smear the ink on her note cards. She is about to begin when Mrs. Ruth tells her they don’t have all day, that she has to get going. Rebecca doesn’t tell her about how frogs have to work their way up to a chorus, how the temperature has to be right and a slight rain doesn’t hurt. She has to swallow again, has to give each hand another rub over her skirt before starting, aware that Mrs. Ruth is staring her down from behind her thick glasses, aware that whispers have already started in the front row.

She begins, pulling her voice up from her feet, trying to speak so loudly that the frogs out in the creek will hear her. “There’s lots of frogs in the pond behind my house. I can hear them call every night in the spring and summer. Around June and July, all the species are calling and it’s something like a symphony. The bullfrogs are like the cellos. The spring peepers are like the flutes. I’m not sure what you’d call the green frogs, but they do call gorgeously. They all have throats that puff out. That’s why, if you go to the edge of the pond and look at it while they’re all calling, you can see the ripples on the surface of the water. Some of those frogs aren’t any longer than your pinky finger, but they have calls that can carry for miles.”

Rebecca knows that her words haven’t quite come out like this, that she slurried several and stuttered a few, that the r’s have somehow all turned into w’s, but she hasn’t listened to each word individually because her father has told her that speaking is like reeling in a large fish. If you think about every little turn of the fishing pole, you’re never going to get the fish in before it springs loose. You just have to keep moving forward.

She gives herself this small rest before telling the part about the bullfrog. She has to catch her breath. Her heart is pounding. Her legs
are shaking. And this next part has to be perfect. She will mention the way the bullfrog stutters in a manner it shouldn't but how beautiful it is anyway, the way it sometimes calls so strongly she can feel the vibrations in her own chest.

“Next,” Mrs. Ruth says. She makes a mark on her paper and then beckons Matthew Price toward the front of the classroom with her hand.

“But—“ Rebecca stomps one of her shoes.

“Next. Your time is up.”

But she has not gotten to the best part. “There’s a bullfrog down in the creek outside—“

“No, you’re done.” Mrs. Ruth gets up from her desk, sets her hands on Rebecca’s shoulders, and pushes her back toward her chair while Matthew Price marches to the front of the class and starts in on a speech about World War II and his great granddaddy fighting in it. Rebecca places her note cards back into her waistband. She doesn’t listen to Matthew or Holly or Billy, who talks about the pig that was just slaughtered on his daddy’s farm, a tale that would make some of the girls in the front row cry, if it weren’t for the fact that they can’t make out much of what he is saying, and instead stare at the largeness of his teeth, his dirty clothes, his large hands—sizing him up to be the despicable person their parents have taught them he is. Rebecca figures Billy’s speech must be the most honest of them all and can’t listen to all of it. She closes her eyes and tries to hear the frogs that she knows are still calling outside.

Mrs. Ruth holds both Billy and Rebecca after school. Not because Rebecca’s dress is torn and Billy has not washed his hands all day. Not because Rebecca spent the latter half of class sitting in the desk farthest from Mrs. Ruth, quietly sniffing into the collar of her shirt. Not because of the content within their speeches.

Mrs. Ruth keeps them after school because neither can speak properly. She makes them stand facing one another, Billy towering over both Rebecca and Mrs. Ruth. They stand about two feet apart and Mrs. Ruth places cold hands on their backs and pushes them in until they are only inches apart and Billy pants out the smell of the bacon sandwich he had for lunch. With her hands on her hips, Mrs. Ruth seems especially stern today and Rebecca worries this afternoon is going to end up like the one Mrs. Ruth made her repeat a long list of words until her throat grew dry and sore and she asked to make a quick trip to the water fountain, a request Mrs. Ruth denied until Rebecca grew so hoarse she began to
cough and couldn’t stop. Her father kept her home from school the next
day, worried she was catching bronchitis.

Now, Rebecca feels nauseous and she puts a hand on her stomach
and looks up at Mrs. Ruth, hoping for an escape.

“You need to work on your pronunciation,” Mrs. Ruth says. “You
can’t roll your words into one. And you need to work on your r’s.”

Rebecca knows. She’s been held after school plenty of times, has had
Mrs. Ruth point to her wedding ring again and again, making Rebecca
repeat the word “ring,” which for her tends to come out as “wing,” which
is not such a bad thing because she thinks *wings* are much better than
*rings* anyway. “Do you want me to say the usual?” Rebecca asks, hoping
her diligence might be worth something to Mrs. Ruth.

Mrs. Ruth folds her arms over her chest and then slowly shakes her
head. “No, I think today I want the both of you to repeat your names.
You ought to at least be able to say who it is that you are. Now, Rebecca,
I’m only asking for your first name. I want you to get that first letter
right. And Billy, now you know you need to work on slowing down, so I
want you to say that whole name of yours.”

Billy pants out bacon breath. Rebecca squeezes the edge of her
skirt. She urges her heart not to pick up its pace, but it does anyway.

“Rebecca, I want to hear yours first,” Mrs. Ruth says.

Rebecca licks her lips, straightens her back, even turns her feet
slightly out to the side, the way Mrs. Ruth once suggested, as if the
words really could be pulled up from Rebecca’s feet. The first syllable
shakes its way out of her mouth, is nothing close to being right, though
she nails *becca*, finishing strong. She stares at the floor, knowing that at
the very least this will give her space to improve because she won’t get
her name to perfect this afternoon, and Mrs. Ruth will want something
accomplished before her father can pick her up and take her home.

Billy plunges his hands into his pockets and gets his first name fine,
but then trips over the terribly long “Jeremiah.” He slurs it together so
that he can get on to “Dward.”

Mrs. Ruth stamps a heel and shakes her head. “Again,” she says.

They both repeat again. And again. Rebecca’s neck stiffens and
her jaw grows sore. She says her name so many times that it doesn’t
even feel like her name anymore. It’s just another awkward word
sliding off her tongue, another thing that doesn’t come out the way she
wants it to. The more she says it, the more she feels her own existence
is withering away. Billy has slowed down some, but he’s still tripping
over “Jeremiah,” trying to turn the four syllables into two.
“Again,” Mrs. Ruth says, stomping her heel into the floor. The vibrations of the stomp travel up Rebecca’s shoes and into her legs. She kicks her head back a notch and stands up straighter. She licks her lips and then gives her tongue a moment to relax inside her mouth before trying her first name again, this time focusing on pushing her lips forward to begin that r and then slowly following through with the other syllables. The r comes out and she beats out the b, ending with a perfectly clear ecca. She has done it this time, and she looks up at Mrs. Ruth, expecting a smile, maybe a pat on the back, maybe even one of those smiley face stickers that Mrs. Ruth offered to Amanda and Holly and Mary, who had the very best speeches today.

Mrs. Ruth offers her a slight nod—nothing more—before saying, “Now your entire name. Now say, Rebecca Renee Mortenier.”

Rebecca swallows and clasps her shaking hands together. She goes again, but her voice really shakes this time and Mrs. Ruth’s head shakes right along with it.

“Can’t you just get it right?” Mrs. Ruth’s eyes are wide and her hands thrust out to the side.

Hot tears burn in the back of Rebecca’s throat. She swallows and then blinks, trying to get them to go away.

“I want you to say it again, Rebecca,” Mrs. Ruth says.

Billy groans, says something about his turn. He stares at the floor and jumps into pronouncing his name again. He slides a dirty sneaker against the floor tile, stuffs his hands into his pockets, and makes his way over “Jeremiah” more slowly this time. He gets caught up just after the jer and slurs it again, jumping on to “Dward.”

“No,” Mrs. Ruth says. “No.”

Rebecca dares to look up at Billy and sees the fire come alight in his green eyes. He sucks his lips into his mouth and then lets them fall out again. Inside his pockets, he curls his fingers into fists. His shoulders hunch forward and he bends his knees, as if getting ready to leap. Rebecca has seen this look before. He looks that way before every game of dodge ball in gym class, before he hurled little Mary Anne off the tire swing on a day he needed it for his Tarzan act, before he stuffed Jimmy Nelson into the recycling bin at the very end of the hall, and before he finished off the classroom’s monarch butterfly that they had watched hatch from a chrysalis only to fly its way right into the ceiling fan before finally fluttering to the floor, where Billy ground it into the carpet, his sneaker leaving behind bits of orange wing dust for the duration of the day.
Rebecca feels Mrs. Ruth’s eyes on her and is about to start her name again when Billy steps away from Rebecca and toward Mrs. Ruth, who gasps while Billy leaps and then curls his arm around her neck and brings her to down to her knees. Some of the dirt in the crook of Billy’s arm rubs off on the collar of Mrs. Ruth’s white blouse. He clamps his hand over her mouth, her eyes so wide they almost become larger than the lenses of her glasses. His fingernails are yellowed and filled with dirt and because Billy’s hand has been on her neck too, Rebecca knows how rough the skin is. Billy says something about his momma, something about his daddy, something about speaking just fine.

Mrs. Ruth tries to rise from her knees, curling the toes of her shoes into the floor and lifting her legs. Billy plants a knee in her thigh and Mrs. Ruth makes a noise that reminds Rebecca of the time her father hit a mole with the lawnmower. She looks up at Rebecca, their eyes meeting, Mrs. Ruth begging Rebecca to run down the hall for help, to check to see if the principal is still around, or to call out if he isn’t.

Rebecca takes one step backward. She eyes the classroom door. Billy looks up at her and Rebecca watches his teeth, trying to forget about his fat lips, trying to make out the words he says to her now—something about hurt, something about Rebecca too. She doesn’t move. She watches while Billy loosens his belt and then uses it to bind Mrs. Ruth’s hands together behind her back. He ties it so tightly that her wrinkles smush together. Then he looks around the classroom.

Mrs. Ruth tries to move again and Billy drops her to the floor face down, his hand pressed into her spine. Her shoulders rise and fall, shaking under her blouse. Rebecca gasps, but finds relief in the fact that Mrs. Ruth’s eyes are no longer on her. Billy reaches into his back pocket and takes out his Swiss Army knife. He flips open the rusty blade and then motions toward the blinds. He says something about cutting, about string, about ankles. He hands the knife to Rebecca. She takes it. It’s wet from the sweat of Billy’s hand and she nearly drops it. The blade is still moist from slicing into the frog. A thick pungent smell that she can’t quite name rises from it.

He waves her on.

She goes to the blinds, pulls a chair up beside them, and then starts cutting the knife across one of the strings because her heart is beating away and she thinks maybe the cutting, maybe catching enough of his words to know what to do, maybe obeying him, will make everything slow down. The knife leaves its orange color of rust on the string and Billy grunts in a way that tells her to hurry up. Finally, the frayed string
gives way. She pauses a moment, balanced on the chair. She presses her ear up against the cold glass, trying to hear the frogs, but can only make out the rain. She wonders if she could escape out the window just now. The rain has picked up and is slanting down the glass. She would likely slip in her shoes, but she could take them off and run in her bare feet. The frogs must be calling even more loudly now. She sets a hand on the cold window latch, squeezes her fingers around it, but can’t get it to lift upward. She feels Billy’s eyes on her back and looks over at him. His teeth hammer against his lips so furiously that blood begins to spot one of his front teeth.

She squeezes the string in her hand and searches the classroom for something kinder to bind Mrs. Ruth’s ankles with. If it must be done, she thinks some purple yarn would be more appropriate. Mrs. Ruth loves purple and she’s a big fan of yarn. It seems like they’re always building something out of yarn.

Billy’s still talking, despite the spots of blood that now dot his chin. His eyes have a shine to them now, that same glow they had after he had Jimmy halfway into the recycling bin, just his legs dangling out. Rebecca fears his teeth, what they could do to her own skin, and she goes to him, reluctantly handing over the string. She swears she can feel the beat of his heart just standing right next to him and there’s sweat beading on his forehead. He ties Mrs. Ruth’s ankles together, pulling tightly enough that he makes a run in Mrs. Ruth’s pantyhose. When she tries to kick at him, lifting one heel up and then the other, Billy takes off Mrs. Ruth’s shoes. Her feet are pale and callused, the nails yellow, the toes wrinkled. Rebecca’s stomach turns at the sight of them.

Mrs. Ruth sneezes into the floor and Rebecca jogs to her desk and snatches a tissue out of the box. She tries to put it in Mrs. Ruth’s hands before remembering that her wrists are bound. Rebecca kneels at her head and gently wipes the tissue across her face, collecting the snot that has formed under her nostrils and around her mouth. She is careful to wipe slowly, knows how delicate this skin is because the ragweed is blooming and Rebecca’s own nose is red and sore. She feels larger somehow, kneeling there above Mrs. Ruth, the air going in and out of her lungs as if she just might have a diaphragm after all.

Mrs. Ruth begins to cry again, more loudly this time, her calls carrying out into the hall, all of her shaking up and down.

Billy looks up at Rebecca. Sweat moves toward his neck now. He licks his bloody lip and then takes his next words slowly: duct tape.

Rebecca knows what he means. Mrs. Ruth has worked small
miracles with her roll of duct tape. That roll fixed the hole in Amanda's backpack. It held Simon's water bottle together for the duration of the day. It reconnected one of the straps of Billy's overalls. And it once reattached the sole to Rebecca's sneaker.

Billy waves her on. Everyone knows that the duct tape is kept in Mrs. Ruth's top desk drawer. When Rebecca doesn't move, he kicks at Mrs. Ruth's side, plunging his dirty sneaker into her ribs. Mrs. Ruth cries again, the sobs cracking out of her throat in a way that makes Rebecca's hands shake. She goes to Mrs. Ruth's desk, opens the drawer, and pulls out the roll of tape. She runs a finger over the tape's slick surface and then fingers the inside of the cardboard roll. For a brief moment, Rebecca considers the tape and what she could possibly do to Billy with it. Maybe if she moved quickly enough she could bind his wrists and ankles too. Maybe all it would take is one swift kick to the groin to bring him down.

Then Mrs. Ruth cries again and Billy drives a knee into her back so hard that Mrs. Ruth silently sobbs into the floor, her tears spilling across the tile, some of them being soaked up by her blouse. Rebecca feels the hit in her own back and goes to Billy. She brings him the tape and he takes it into his large hands, tearing off a five inch section. He holds it stuck against his pointer finger and then smiles at Rebecca, his large front teeth jamming into his lower lip, making out the words *tape* and *mouth*. He holds the piece of tape out to her.

Rebecca freezes, searches her skirt for pockets that aren't there. A strange shiver scuttles up her spine. She has had daydreams about Mrs. Ruth, has thought about the day Mrs. Ruth would finally grow old enough that all her teeth would fall out and she wouldn't be able to speak right either, would have her tongue flapping around, thumping against her gums, spit droplets taking flight from the corners of her mouth. Rebecca would have words to say to her then, would be a fine matured young lady and would know the largest words in the dictionary and be able to speak them with relative ease while Mrs. Ruth would be incapable of forming a coherent response.

But she never thought that Mrs. Ruth would be dropped to the floor today. She never thought Billy would be standing beside her, casting off heat from the struggle of binding Mrs. Ruth's limbs. And she really didn't imagine that Billy would offer this piece of tape that he is now thrusting toward her again. While she hates the things that Billy does, all he's ever done is knocked some people, some things, down a notch. And a part of him is like that bullfrog. He stutters and
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can’t pronounce much of anything, but he says every word with the utmost confidence. He’s fearless, even when addressing his teachers, even when speaking in front of the class. This now—him offering her the final piece of tape—is a gift she’d never be able to offer herself.

She takes the piece of tape from him and holds it between her thumb and pointer finger. It seems heavy, extra sticky, and she can’t quite get her feet to move.

He nods to her.

She drops to her knees, the cold floor sending a chill up her body. Mrs. Ruth buries her head in the floor, pressing her nose into the tiles so that it slips sideways, a new strand of snot sniveling from her nostril. Rebecca’s stomach turns while a jolt of adrenaline floods her blood stream. Mrs. Ruth tries to roll over, but Billy clamps his knee onto her back and then turns Mrs. Ruth’s head toward Rebecca.

Mrs. Ruth’s eyes are watching her and Rebecca slips off the glasses and places her hand over the eyes, Mrs. Ruth’s skin cold and damp. With the other, she presses the tape in place, smoothing it out over Mrs. Ruth’s mouth. She covers light-colored hairs growing on Mrs. Ruth’s upper lip and her dry and cracked lips. The edge of the tape tries to cover Mrs. Ruth’s nostrils and Rebecca carefully folds the tape over, ensuring Mrs. Ruth can still breathe.

Billy says something about too much nice. He lets Mrs. Ruth go and then stands, watching her squirm and try to make noise through the duct tape. He kneels at her head and gives the duct tape one more good slap, palming Mrs. Ruth’s mouth so hard her head kicks back and she doesn’t make a sound for a few seconds. Rebecca freezes until she is sure Mrs. Ruth is breathing again. He’s messed up Rebecca’s careful duct tape fold, and it looks like one of Mrs. Ruth’s nostrils is partially blocked. But Rebecca can tell by the way Mrs. Ruth’s stomach moves in and out under her blouse that she is still breathing. She squeezes her hands together and then glances up at the clock, realizing that her father must be here, that he has probably been here for a few minutes.

Billy grabs his backpack from his cubby in the far corner of the classroom and slings it over his shoulder. Mrs. Ruth squirms more furiously now. Dark ovals show in the armpits of her blouse and she tries to speak through the duct tape, but all that comes out are a few desperate hums. She rolls herself over onto her back and catches Rebecca’s gaze. Mrs. Ruth’s eyes are glassy with tears and the whites seem larger than ever. Without her glasses, Mrs. Ruth looks even older, deep wrinkles curving under her eyes. Rebecca realizes that she could
say anything—everything—now and Mrs. Ruth would not be able to interrupt her, would not be able to correct her, would not be able to tell her all the things she has done wrong. She rolls her tongue around in her mouth, unsure of where to even begin.

Billy squeezes Rebecca’s forearm and begins to drag her toward the door, muttering something about a lesson, about no worry, about being found. His fingers are hot and rough and Rebecca doesn’t even fight him long enough to grab her own backpack. She follows him out the front doors and into the rain that is falling more heavily now, pounding off the sidewalk and then forming a stream and that curves away down the curb.

In the front of the parking lot, her father’s lights are on. The windshield wipers whip back and forth. At the door, she pauses a moment, swallows hard, and then steps inside, letting a little rain in with her. She is sure to hide the torn section of her skirt under her bottom. She slides her shoes against the floor and takes the handkerchief her father offers her, wiping the rain from her face.

“How’d it go?” Her dad asks. He has one hand rested on the steering wheel, the other on his knee. His lips curl into a gentle smile.

“Same as always,” she says. She pulls the note cards from her waistband and dabs away at them with the handkerchief.

“What word did you practice today?” He takes the handkerchief away from her, worried she might get ink on it.

She wants to tell him that she learned a new word today, a good one, a meaningful one, something like “resilient,” maybe even “rare,” which would be a real challenge and a real victory, given the repeating r. But this is the one part of her day she can offer to her father in truth. “I had to say my name.”

“Let’s hear it.” He leans back in his seat and folds his hands in his lap.

“I wish you hadn’t named me that at all.”

“You can’t go blaming me for a name your mother chose. Come on, now. Let’s hear it.”

She shakes her head and stares out toward the creek. The water is rising and the current has already picked up. From this distance, she can’t make out the frogs bobbing at the surface, but she doesn’t doubt they are there. She considers trying her name once for her father because he will be pleased in a way Mrs. Ruth never will be. But her tongue is tired. “I’m just not saying it now.”

“Well, okay then. Maybe tonight. After dinner.” He puts the car in gear and then looks over at her again. “Aren’t you cold?”

Rebecca rubs her arms and shrugs.
“Didn’t you wear a coat to school?”

She rests a hand on the cold door handle for a brief moment before slipping it off again. Later, she will tell herself she would have went, would have freed Mrs. Ruth, if it weren’t for the rain. “Classroom’s locked. Can’t go back now.” Goose bumps rise along her limbs and she squeezes her arms over her chest. “I’m ready to go home.” She stumbles over the r and wishes she’d stuck to a simple command: home.

Her father pulls out of the parking lot. They pass Billy at the end of the sidewalk, dripping in rain, the blood cleaned from his teeth and lips, still waiting for his father’s beat-up pick-up truck, the one with cracks in the windshield that must be letting in the rain. Billy waves to Rebecca, and she presses a hand to the window, spreading out her fingers and hoping he’ll see it through the rain-covered pane.

Her father glances over at her. “You aren’t friends with him, are you?” His eyebrows rise while he waits for her answer.

“No, of course not.” She’s sorry she didn’t stop at no. Course didn’t come out right.

“But you’re still nice to him? You’re still polite?”

“I’m plenty nice,” Rebecca says.

Her father nods while they cross out of the parking lot and onto the main road. They make their way over the bridge that crosses the creek, the rain pounding the windshield and the wipers struggling to keep up. Large puddles form in the potholes in the road while the rain begins to turn to hail that bounces off the sides of the car, making Rebecca think not of Billy still stuck out in the weather, not of Mrs. Ruth tied up inside, but of the bullfrog down in the creek below her, if it is still calling.
Mary Bush

Persephone

As if the girl were a sparrow, artless as the breeze, unaware of the dark eye that watched, transfixed, her fingers cup the bell-shaped flower. As if her tongue knew only the trembling speech of nectar, pretty face blank as a bud; as if her pale and grass-stained knees were made for kneeling.

This is the story he writes, furiously, in the dim light, each time I shrug his thick robe from my shoulders and step into the sun.

In his story, the empty-headed girl is tempted by a sweet, misshapen fruit. She swallows the seed, and he imagines the seed is like a dead weight, and the girl is like a fish, a pretty bit of silver struggling on the line. His words are stones turned from soil. He knows nothing of my hands, how I long to smooth the furrow from his dark brow, to hold the seed in my mouth, plait my hair with rapier weed and trumpet vine, lie breathless and ripening, ready for release.
In my story, he is not afraid of sleep. Winter is not death. A seed is desire that seeks the earth, and a girl is like an arrow through the slow heart of a bear.
Christina Cook

Starling

I want the song of the starling that nests
in the pepperidge tree
to be the way my blood flows
through the four empty chambers of my heart

and the mist that lifts off the bay in threads
that feed the tree frogs
to be the way your finger finds my pulse
when I am still.

I want to weave the hopes of next year’s boys
into a time when the old stone wall

finally falls into the lake,
taking the idea of walls with it,

plait the hair of next year’s girls into limbs
of the tree that uprooted the wall,

compelling the starling to sing.
October, and the chrysanthemums are not without ambition. To bloom, if only for one week, is then the paramount ambition.

Quickly he judged the levels above him and the relevant adjacencies. He’d not forget; he’d isolate that shape and name the fault ambition.

Long before the marsh god was born, a place was determined. Where the tide drenched the shore, where the wind tore the tree, there crouched ambition.

When we are young, we reserve a space in the heart for the outside chance. When we are old, we drowse, then startle: white-out! Inviolate ambition!

In an agreement between yourself and your desires, there is a future self the self moves toward. Even when the work is good, we can’t discount ambition.

We hardly know what to do with the infant we adore. We can feed the child, but he will choose which to favor: compassion, love, doubt, ambition.

Did you leave the worn corridors behind you, did you venture forth? Surprised to find yourself here, are you, so plain in your cloth ambition?
In the Garden of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen

I’d never seen bamboo like that: living, green. I slipped between the stems, weaving through them. Permission seemed to come from something in their structure. And through the lattice openings in the wall between the gardens, I saw people passing slowly, examining the vegetation growing closest, or noticing what had before been hidden from them. In the garden of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the paths have been allowed to modulate in their materials—gray sunken pebbles, then darker oblong stones—and curved tiles, glazed and cooled to darkest brown, reappear throughout the grounds: as shingles on pavilion roofs and, worked into the landscaping, there they are again, set on edge and lining sections of the path, establishing one tempered tone, a consciousness. Sometimes people slowed, sometimes they stopped, their postures settled, sinking, and then this drifted down and caught: it made no difference to them anymore and never mind and let it drop,
although we couldn’t help but hear
the air wound taut—bright white screamings
from the Molson Indy, near.
I’d glimpsed it from the sky train
just before our stop

when a man seated facing me
—twenty-eight he must have been,
Asian, in his business suit—straightened
in excitement and, smiling hard enough
to be a boy, lifted from his seat,

and lodged that moment into history.
In the garden of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen,
everyone walked through that noise,
or paused in it, as if it weren’t unfortunate.
There, everything has been measured,

everything has been observed.
Long ago a gong was struck.
Sound shimmied through the air,
through bamboo, pine, and winter-blooming plum.
The sound was in the pond, the stones,

each leaf and space between, the sound was in
the wood plank sequence of the bridge.
The turtle on the rock held his head level
to that sound. He would never move.
The sound would never stop.
My Job as a Child

I spent my childhood filling things in.  
I spent my childhood thrown out on the rug,  
rubbing crayon on pages  

in big thin books  
until color spread to the edge of the shape  
where a black, pre-drawn line defined it.  

I loved the August rhythms  
in the action of the hand’s edge against the page,  
and the interruption:  

the crucial exchange of one crayon  
for another in the cardboard box,  
one of so many decisions.  

I used the point or, more rarely,  
(and peeled of its paper) the side.  
I used short, quick, back-and-forth strokes  
or long ones running in the same direction  
or filled a circle from the center out  
like the iris of an eye.  

I applied greater pressure,  
leaning heavy over my work,  
or held my hand far away  

and made bright or dark be faint.  
There was the painstaking dotting-it-in,  
there were curly hair strokes,
patches, zigzags, waves.
Members of my household politely stepped over me.

The books were cheap and quiet.

One day an old friend of my mother’s came to stay with us and reminisce.

I sprawled out on the floor at some remove from wherever they sat to talk, stuck like a far star is stuck to its constellation,

and I colored along, drunk in my deductions…

One.) Vi could remember my mother from a time before she had married.

Two.) Vi had never married anyone herself.

Three.) Vi was an artist.

Therefore, for all of the days of her visit I listened to their talk as if any other action on my part would make it stop.

And when one morning the story did stop and Vi broke in and said a thing that seemed to me abrupt and unrelated, There will be no more coloring books, I looked up for a clue in her face.

After a pause the story simply resumed.

A package came for me from Kansas a few weeks after that:
Julie Hanson

pastels and paints
and two sorts of paper, one slick,
one absorbent. And I spent them all,

imagining a life of it, one thick page
after another,
bottomless, bottomless.

Soon only a smudged assortment was left,
and so I slid out the coloring books
and turned to a page

that hadn’t been done
and began filling in, no less satisfied
and no happier than before,

for the whole endeavor
was about texture,
more than we might suppose,

and less than we might imagine
a project of fantasy, autobiography, or wish.
The years have come,

and some few memories so slight
that they are hardly what they are.
They are agenda-less and dumb.

I believe they are as accurate
as anything I will ever make again.
They don’t notice that I notice them.
Plaza IGA, 1981

Work begins in lidded quiet
before sunrise. Dad holds the keys.
We are the first ones in the store.
Every sacred time is dark.

Punchclock, military time,
my card purples my fingers.
He wears a tie, me an apron,
box knife stitched in its own pocket.

Manager, but he can work,
shuck the onions, move the freight.
No complaint but shirts so silky
they snag the skin of his hands.

Bread truck, Coke truck, magazine van.
Dairy crates, metal wheel runners,
pallets of sugar and flour,
Get 'em stacked 'cause more's rolling.

Label gun, ink stamp, load the cart,
get the stock out. Empty boxes
to the furnace. Strike up a fire.
Work you develop a taste for.

A discount store called Hobo's
and an ambulance ended it.
Do a search and you'll find nothing
to say men like him held a place.

I still like the feel of work shirts,
just can't wear the flimsy fabrics.
I like thick socks and jeans too, named after gold rush men, coal miners.

Now my father sleeps in me.
Now the skin of my hands is soft.
When I touch them to my son’s face in the dark, they can prove nothing.
Cynthia Huntington

Fire Muse

If I wait forever I cannot love you enough.
You are my death, you are my undoing, sweet at the center.
The small gray mouse glides under the cupboard: little soul, thumbprint of smudge. So light

if she ran across your arm you would feel only
a dazzle, as air moving.
The lamps wait on the table under the window.
The lamp has a soul, inanimate, gold, the color of oil. Ignited, it pours itself upward, measured through a wick dipped in oil.

Now the whole world is breathing,
small, particular breaths:

mouse, wind, the night moth puffing her wings.

Feel the dunes shift and sigh, their sand finding its weight as stone,
reforming.

Where are you tonight?
Where could you desire to be but here, in the last light of summer evening

kissing salt from my neck,
just now, before the small suns of the lamps are set burning?
Make me sand between your fingers, flame blossomed from oil,
be my undoing,
all being focused in a moment of split light.

When all parts of the mind join together:
a flash as the soul wakes alone.
First there had to be an emptiness.
   It is following
      something outside the self;
the only way forward is discovering
   the world already present
      before you.
Before you, the creeks fill and empty,
   the channel carved, ready.
      Oh, the ocean reaches so far
into the marshes, up
   every estuary, steady,
      pressing into its own
remembered places, the emptiness
   it made with its desire,
      moving up the land,
returning to fill whole channels
   it has worn. Moving,
      it flows, or it is drawn
there, called back,
      like a heart not forgetting
         each artery and capillary,
feeding the most distant flesh
   from the heart drawn forward.
      Where love has been once
allowed, limitless, into the furthest
dry places, the body
      will still hunger in that place
for what it had only
begun to feel
      the need of. So gentle,
with the force of planets—
      I wade to my knees in warm water,
following the salt creeks,
salt on my skin, blue sky,
gold sky, the sun
on my arms, blue
in my eyes reflected; the water
has come in so far,
almost to the edge of the dunes.
Again it will be dry land
by dark. No fear in
the high grasses when the tide
flows out, grass rising in air,
channels that curve and wind back
on themselves with no
destination, water going
wherever it can go, no purpose but to fulfill
the flowing. How you can ask
anything of the world
and it is given; it is
so rich, the sand washed
clean by water, land
it covers and withdraws from,
loosened, all bonds held
in the heart of the thing, never
a duty, less a repetition, but
desire renewed to be
unbound, as it is here,
to appear where one most desires
it to appear, and lightly, more
lightly, to go—not away
but forward—always following desire.
What you ask will be given; the world
will open for you and never
fail. A full heart emptying
into an emptiness
overflowing, drawing forth
from what is full.
Monica

She came down the hill,
cutting through the backyards
of lighted houses, a bag of apples
clutched in her arms, her sneakers
slipping on the wet grass.
The dusk was smoke-colored,
purple chrysanthemums and yellow
leaves subsiding to drab,
and already the moon rising
full and transparent, behind the brick houses.
She wanted to give me the apples:
“We have so many!” and I took them
and stood talking, wondering what to do.
I was home before midterms,
my bag heavy with books, ponderous
chronicles of the wreck of the century:
Warsaw, Paris, St. Petersburg, Berlin….
Her daughter, who had been my friend,
and the baby, and Jerry, were living in the next town.
Jerry was going to school nights.
I should go see them—she said it
without reproach, wanting to make things right.
I had three days
and I would go back on the bus. I said yes,
thinking no, and stood there
holding the brown paper sack on my hip,
bulging, bumpy, hard. The apples
smelled only cold, the way the air smelled,
and the night coming up behind us,
empty and hard, cold water and rock.
She turned and went back up the hill.
Back inside, I set the apples on the table,
letting them spill out, and I sat down with my books under a bright overhead light as night closed over the house where I sat and read, not comprehending the wreck of that century, ending, helpless before all I did not know, turning pages in the kitchen. The empty house creaked and settled as the scent of the apples lifted, warming, their skins glaring deep red with brown patches and spots of yellow, the cider tang wakening in them as I read, unaware of the night closing over me, the year ending, stars pulling back into deep space and the planet tipping toward dark, the earth’s last gifts.
In the Water of the Ganges,
Everything Becomes Sacred

Ganga and Ravi sat on the couch in their master bedroom, watching rain lash the ground outside. For the arid San Jose landscape around them, such a deluge seemed foreign. Still, the ground accepted the water, turned to mud. Ravi had taken Ganga’s feet in his lap. He kneaded the soles just so, pulled on the toes exactly as he knew she liked. She was twenty-one weeks pregnant. In their parents’ generation, a husband would never touch his wife’s feet and Ravi knew this. He hoped his ministrations would help him to get Ganga to reveal the sex of their child, who they now knew was a girl, to his mother.

They were both looking at the little water feature that Ganga had so fallen in love with when they bought the house four years ago. Ravi was proud of the upgraded pumps he had had put in. He’d even had a generator connected to them so that the river could, theoretically, bubble over the imported rocks and under the expanse of turf in perpetuity. His wife was named for India’s most sacred river and it seemed fitting to him that Ganga got such pleasure from her own little stream running in the garden.

“Don’t start, honey,” she said. “Not today.”

Ravi loved how well she read him. He liked that she was a fair match for him and admired her for it. In business, he was the undisputed deal master, and had even had his stipple portrait in the Wall Street Journal recently.

“You’re too smart for me,” Ravi said.

Ravi’s mother had demanded to know the sex of the child because it affected her plans for the shrimant she was expected to host for Ganga. The traditional Indian baby shower dispensed with cupcakes and cute booties and instead featured the formal giving of gifts to the attending guests. His mother had been texting at an alarming rate since she’d heard they’d had the ultrasound.

Ravi leaned in close so that Ganga could smell his aftershave. He knew she had always liked the smell.
“Come on, honey. Have you thought about what I said?” he asked.
“We’re keeping the sex a secret,” said Ganga. “We already agreed.”
“I know we did, honey.”
“Is your mother giving better gifts if you tell her it’s a girl?” Ganga asked.

They both already knew the answer. Ravi’s mother would give expensive gold gifts if it were a boy, cheaper silver gifts if it was a girl. Ravi could hear his mother’s voice in his head, telling him he was the man of the house, the one whose wishes the wife was obliged to honor, and here he was rubbing his wife’s feet instead.

“I don’t want you to change your mind unless you absolutely want to, okay?” said Ravi.

Since this wasn’t true, a silence settled between Ravi and Ganga, the sort that only married people can inflict on one another. Ravi knew well enough that Ganga didn’t want their daughter to start life as a second-class citizen, one whose birth was somehow worthy of only a lesser celebration. In principle, he agreed with her. But the bond between Indian mothers and their sons ran deep, far, and long into the past. Ravi was just another indebted scion, richer than his forebears, but neither stronger nor weaker than them. His mother was the woman who had stood by him when he dropped out of medical school. She was the woman who had convinced his father to loan Ravi money not once, but twice. When he thought about it, no one else had done more for his success, for his ability to give Ganga the life they had together, than his mother. Whenever he finished speaking to her, it seemed just a small courtesy to tell her the sex of the child. If he’d taken the call at home, he’d see Ganga watching him, and the small courtesy would become a very big argument. To him, Ganga and his mother were the bookends of his life, the one having brought him into the world, the other sure to watch him leave it. Yet despite the connection he felt in his trajectory between one and the other, the women themselves were charged with antipodal forces, repelling each other whenever they were in proximity. He could only fail in his quest to give happiness to them both. Ganga broke the silence.

“This is about our daughter, Ravi. You and your mother can just do the shrimant without me, okay?”

He wedged himself into the inside edge of the couch and nudged Ganga into leaning on his chest. He needed to feel the weight of her against him as if supporting her physical body would help him support her wishes, too. He stroked her hair gently.
“I know this is hard, sweetheart,” he said, as much for himself as for his wife. He tried to let the weight of her melt into him, become part of his own fortitude. However, his allegiance to his mother was an ineluctable force. It puppetted him. When he heard his voice say what he feared and yet knew it would, he felt grieved.

“I only want to rethink our position for our daughter’s sake.” He sounded like a businessman now, not a husband, not a father-to-be. “If we tell mom it’s a girl, it’s kind of like an investment.”

“Ravi, please. Not so much stocks and bonds, okay?”

At this point he let his deal-closing instincts take over, let the rush of knowing he was going to win this round obliterate any other feelings.

“Sweetheart, in the end, the baby will get a better inheritance if mom doesn’t spend all her money now.”

He spoke automatically, leading Ganga into the only blind argument that would elicit the response he needed. He began to talk about the volatility of his business, the devil’s deal between owner equity and venture capital, and lastly, the sad state of heart disease in his family. He took his time. Ganga had already lost her father. He knew she couldn’t think straight when she had to consider his mortality. Eventually, she stopped him, just as he knew she would.

“Ravi, please, don’t tempt fate, okay? We went to the estate-planning lawyer. You’ve had a total check-up with the cardio guy. We have investments. We even have life insurance.”

Ravi stopped stroking her hair because he could feel her shame. She had mentioned the insurance money, the blood money. She didn’t come from wealth and had told him early on that she feared he would think she was choosing him for his. And now she’d mentioned the price on his head. In her humiliation, he could feel his victory, such as it was. He waited.

“Listen, honey. I’ll do whatever you want me to, okay?” he said.

This was it, his ostensible abdication of the final say that was his signature way of getting what he wanted.

“Tell your mother, then,” she whispered.

In the boardroom, he’d relish this moment, the one where his opponent surrendered. Instead, a new, more wounded silence settled between them, the weight of which replaced the feeling of Ganga leaning on him.

“It’s the right thing to do, honey,” he said, willing himself to believe it even as he spoke. He was, as his mother always said, the man of the house.

Ganga had met Ravi at a Bay area/Silicon Valley Indian professional mixer, the sort at which immigrant parents hoped the right boy
would bump into the right girl when they reached for the same samosa. She’d noticed him as soon as he walked in because of the flutter of women he attracted moth-like toward him. His square jaw and shoulders—upon which he wore a dun-colored shirt—would have made him look no better than a block of milk chocolate, except that his black hair fell in waves and framed a face of surprisingly fine features. The effect was striking and, in short, he looked like the sort of man who Ganga assumed would overlook her. She felt dowdy. Her skirt was neither as tight nor as short as the women around him, and she wished she’d done something better with her hair. His entrance seemed like a good time to walk over to the snack table.

Soon enough, she was transported by the scent of coriander and mint, of cumin and turmeric, and relaxed into deciding between the pakoras and the samosas. Without her father’s metabolism, she would balloon six sizes up given the amount of fried food she ate. Whenever she felt, as she did now, unappealing or small or poor (because poor was the best you could feel when you told your friends your father worked at a 7-Eleven), Ganga’s body always allowed her the treat of her choice. Closing her eyes to better experience the aroma around her, she reached for the pakora she wanted.

“Do you come here often?” a voice said.

Ganga dropped the tongs and laughed at the cliché. In almost the same instant, she also looked over her shoulder to make sure that the handsome man in front of her wasn’t actually trying get someone else’s attention. The voice had been Ravi’s. Weeks later, Ravi would tell her that it was that gesture—her turning away from him when he was sure that she would turn toward him—that had electrified him.

“No,” was all Ganga had managed in response. She was disappointed that she couldn’t match his wit in the moment. She was awkward at events like these but went because her parents wanted her to. Her father had been diagnosed by then and everyone agreed that it would give him peace to know that he had dispatched his basic parental duty of seeing his daughter happily married before he died.

When Ravi did reach past Ganga to pick up a pakora, she caught the scent of him for the first time. To her horror, she made some moronic comment about the way he smelled. Her stumble revealed what was there between them: her naked attraction for him, to take or leave as he pleased. He had walked her to her car that night and simply stroked her hand when he helped her in. It was just enough.

Ganga hadn’t wanted to tell Ravi about her father’s illness, but by their third date, her father had just had more surgery and she couldn’t
really think of anything else. She was pleased that Ravi didn’t seem
to flinch at the serious turn in her conversation. When he offered
to accompany her to the hospital the next day, she was stunned and
moved and heartened, all of which she understood as falling in love.

After that first visit, Ganga knew from the nurses that Ravi went
to see her father a number of times without her and always took a
serving of sweet kheer from the Indian restaurant near the hospital.
She couldn’t help but imagine Matt Damon or Shah Rukh Khan doing
the same in the sort of romantic movie that she preferred.

Once when she visited her father he said, “Ravi will provide well for
you if that’s what you want.” She’d taken this as his endorsement of their
match. After that, she had simply been caught in the age-old forward
moving force of what happens when a suitable boy meets a suitable
girl and their parents get their hopes up. Ganga’s father recovered his
strength enough to perform the sacred prayers at their wedding, but the
newlywed couple cut their honeymoon short when news of his death
reached them by fax in the Virgin Islands. When her new husband held
her during her spasms of grief, she was aware that she was now in the
hands of the most important man in her life. Whenever he behaved
badly toward her, which wasn’t often, she’d always remind herself of this
truth.

She did so when he made her agree to let his mother know they
were having a girl. Instead of comfort, however, she felt like she was
drowning. The drowning wasn’t nausea, which was a recognizable
physical presence in her body; it was a soul-drenching sadness, as if after
four short years, her marriage was beginning to end. She had continued
to watch the rainfall outside after Ravi left her on the couch. In between
sobs, she followed the course of some of the larger garden debris as it
bobbed down her stream.

“What will you do?” thought Ganga, sink or swim? She was reminded
of one of her favorite games from childhood when she’d collect things
from around the house to see what would happen to them in a water-
filled sink. “Thurse ke dubse?” she’d ask out loud and then plop each item
into the bathroom sink. Her mother would storm in and pull the plug
because of the mess, because Ganga should be cleaning up around the
house, not making more puddles, because if she couldn’t have been a son
for her parents, she could at least be useful. There’d been a miscarriage
before Ganga and her mother had simply expected to be rewarded with
a son for her loss. Instead, she got Ganga.

Still, her father indulged her. “Try this,” he’d say when he found
her in the morning at the end of his nightshift at the 7-Eleven. And what did he have in his pocket? A foil gum wrapper. A bus transfer. A button from his uniform. “Ganga-jal ma puithra,” he’d say to her, in the water of the Ganges, everything becomes sacred. He’d wait for Ganga to fish out the button or foil so he could kiss it reverently and thank his river-named daughter for sanctifying it.

Curling up on the couch, she surrendered to her tears. She was aware that she had promised herself she would cherish her daughter. Yet she had given her baby girl up to her mother-in-law’s machinations, machinations that she saw her husband was too weak to defy. She’d heard from her friends that most Indian men eventually became good husbands first and sons second, but now she began to understand that Ravi was never going to make the switch. She wished, in the romantic way that she did sometimes, for a sign that would tell her what to do now that her life was well and truly falling apart.

Inside her, Ganga’s own baby girl, unnamed as yet, was floating. Neither sinking nor having to swim, she was perfectly suspended, her life before her a question mark waiting to pull her into the world.

It was half way through Ganga’s seventh month, in May, when a scorching heat wave settled into Silicon Valley. The region got its name, of course, from the key material used to build microchips, but on the fourth day of the heat wave, the day of Ganga’s shrimant, it was hard not to imagine that the place was simply a valley of sand, a place foreign and hostile to rivers, where the slim shade offered by the palm trees was merely added insult to the heat. A caravan of Mercedes, SUVs and the odd worn Toyota, lined the street where Ravi and Ganga’s house occupied the most desirable location.

Ravi was glad-handing guests downstairs. A man holding a raven-haired bouncing boy on his hip shook Ravi’s hand vigorously.

“Girl or boy, man?” he asked

“Girl,” said Ravi, trying to sound proud.

“Hey, that’s great. Just great,” said the man and walked away.

Ravi understood people well. He knew that the man didn’t mean “great” at all, that he pitied the tea parties, and pink, and princesses that were in his future. Ravi felt a near physical wrenching as a new anger rose hotly from his gut into his chest and throat. He recognized the feeling immediately. Years ago, when his business partner had exploited a loophole in their contract together, he told Ravi that it was a valuable “life lesson.” All men were dogs on a leash, he’d said, and at
some point in life, you get your chain choked. Do you whimper and heel, or do you pull and break free?

Upstairs in the master bedroom, Ganga’s cousin Mira was wrapping her in a traditional garchola sari, the sort reserved for married women.

“You look great,” said Mira. “Like a real goddess! Want me to get Ravi for a sneak-peek?”

“No. I want to surprise him,” Ganga demurred.

“So cute!” said Mira. “I’ll get Auntie, okay?” She meant Ganga’s mother-in-law, the woman in charge of the day, the one who’d give her a vinegary once over. She left Ganga alone.

What Ganga had wanted to say to Mira was that nothing was cute in the real world. That husbands and wives manipulated each other with sex, with money, with lies, that mothers betrayed their daughters before they were born, that life was about drowning—either faster or slower, but drowning just the same.

If only for the effort Mira had put into her makeup already, Ganga tried not to cry. A shrimant was supposed to transform the expectant mother into an actual avatar of the devi, of the divine female principle of creation; ostensibly, people had gathered downstairs to be in Ganga’s sacred aura. She felt unworthy and basically, hypocritical. Why were these Indian immigrants still performing shrimants? It was such a farce, she thought, especially since in her case, the whole thing had become an occasion to diminish the birth of her daughter, not celebrate some sort of ancient girl power. There was a knock.

“Come in,” she said, touching her brow to try and relax. In came Auntie with Mira and Ganga’s mother, too.

“Let’s take a look at you, then,” Auntie said.

They left the door ajar and Ganga could now smell the feast, which comforted her. The sound of an old woman singing rose above all the other noises in the house. Other women’s voices joined in; the shrimant had begun in earnest. Ganga looked at the women standing in her room. Her mother had arrived in the plainest sari she could have worn. As a widow, she was expected to abjure the fineries of the married world. Auntie, however, in her embroidered sari and layers of jewels—with gold in her hair, on her chest, even around her waist—would make a peacock look plain. Ganga’s mother began to speak above the song.

“My baby girl!” she cried.

Ganga balanced herself to prepare for the embrace, but it didn’t come. Her mother simply clasped her hands and kept them to herself.
Ganga recognized immediately that the woman who had given birth to her had avoided touching her. Her mother’s stain of bad fortune—of miscarriage and widowhood—couldn’t be allowed to touch Ganga. She was, in effect, quarantined. For the first time, Ganga was pained at her mother’s exclusion through no fault but bad luck. She felt an unfamiliar feeling of compassion for her. There she was, someone’s motherless daughter, making the best out of her diminished circumstances.

“The day’s devi herself,” Auntie said, “Lovely, lovely.”

Ganga and Mira exchanged looks. Neither one could believe that Auntie was behaving with such decency.

“Jaldi, jaldi,” Auntie said, meaning “hurry, hurry.” With that, Ganga led the procession out of the room.

Outside the house, the temperature continued to climb, forcing a power outage. No one inside the house noticed. Ravi’s generators turned on silently, but with an undetectable power surge. The air conditioner continued to maintain a refreshing indoor temperature of 68 degrees, but the surge tripped on the sprinklers. They sent water cascading into the garden stream.

Ganga was walking along the upstairs corridor. Looking over the banister, she could see that the men had retired to the appetizer table, away from the ceremony proper. There were women in the corridor and along the steps, all clad in their best red or green or saffron saris. Many of them were singing and clapping. Some had come prepared with chiming bells. The song died down and an old woman’s voice began a different tune. Who was she, this starter of songs?

Someone called for Ravi’s younger brother. Auntie picked up a silver tray filled with various colored powders, a small ring of mung beans, a dollop of red paste, and a coconut. She took her son’s hands and had him dip his finger in the red paste and mark Ganga’s forehead in a symbol of blessing and good fortune. This was the role of the youngest son, the living incarnation of the last great blessing that the family had received. The song paused and women clapped in approval.

At each step, Ganga’s brother-in-law placed dried fruit and nuts near her feet, all symbols of fertility, and as she crossed these small piles of forage, he stooped to pick them up and deposit them in a separate tub that Mira carried. Ganga’s progress was slow. The singing continued now without abatement, as did the sound of hand bells that punctuated chorus from verse.

How long did it take to get down the stairs? Ganga didn’t know. She was just her senses: a listening, watching, moving being. She approached
the makeshift altar in front of the fireplace and saw at its right an old, old woman who she had never seen before. She was the starter of songs. Her bony hand reached out and clutched Ganga, gently pulling her down to a sitting position. Auntie sat in front of Ganga and put the silver tray beside the old woman. The singing stopped.

The old woman began to speak. Her voice came from far and long away.

“Daughter, do you know why we use a coconut today?”

“No,” said Ganga.

“They grow along the ocean. So salty, the water, no?”

Ganga nodded and saw other women do the same.

“But they are a miracle inside. They turn the salt water of the sea into sweet coconut water, just as a woman is able to turn her salty tears into the sweet nectar of life.”

Ganga nodded again, but less enthusiastically. She had frankly had enough of her own tears in the course of her pregnancy. The old woman passed the coconut between Ganga and her mother-in-law. For a long while, Ganga simply followed directions. As the ceremony drew to a close, the women started to get up. They would escort Ganga to her little stream, where she would toss the mung beans into water. The spell of the shrimant seemed to be broken as the guests, men and women alike, began chattering. Indeed, for a moment, Ganga herself felt abandoned. The cocoon of women who had surrounded her had dispersed. The old woman had disappeared. She saw Ravi walking toward her and felt the drowning feeling return. From behind her, she heard her mother-in-law’s voice.

“Yes, yes. It’s a girl,” she said.

“God grant you a grandson next time,” said a woman in response.

Ganga could tell from his eyes that Ravi had heard the woman, too. The drowning feeling intensified as Ganga wondered why her daughter wasn’t blessing enough. Her throat began to close but there were words in it that she needed to choke out. She was shaking.

“Are you okay?” someone asked her. Ganga turned and saw it was the same woman who had been talking to Auntie. She looked normal enough, a little doughy around the middle, badly dyed black hair, and yet she could simply wish Auntie to have a grandson, as if that was the most gracious thing to say.

“No,” said Ganga, her voice a tremor, “I’m not okay.” Her voice gained volume. “Listen,” she said, nearly shouting. “I want a girl. I am glad it is a girl.” Ganga held her belly in defiance of decorum. Her
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garchola slipped slightly and revealed the bare mound of her belly. Men turned away from the scene. “All I ever wanted was this girl, this girl right here.” The chatter in the room was silenced. Ganga’s heavy breath was all that could be heard.

Suddenly the doughy woman spoke. “Hurry, hurry,” she said, “Ganga’s not feeling well. Get her some water.”

“Wishing for sons, it’s just a way of talking,” another woman said. “No one means anything by it.”

A hand holding a glass of water was thrust in front of Ganga. She wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of offering a drowning woman a glass of water, at the impossibility of being understood. Just when she was about to lose her bearings completely, Ravi spoke.

“I’m glad it’s a girl, too,” he said. “We couldn’t be happier to be having a daughter.”

Ganga looked at her husband and the array of guest-gifts on the mantle behind him. Suddenly, it didn’t matter what was inside the packages. She began to cry.

“Please, please, enjoy the samosas,” said Ravi to the crowd.

“Yes, yes,” said Auntie, looking relieved. “They were catered fresh just this morning.”

Then Ravi moved closer to Ganga, picked up the fallen fold of her garchola, and placed it back over her belly. He whispered into Ganga’s ear. Could she smell his cologne yet? Despite herself, she smiled.

Conversations began in small pockets. Calls for more chutney sent the catering staff into the kitchen.

“These younger generations, they don’t understand,” said a man nearby.

“Parents only want what’s best for their children. But who understands that?” said his wife.

Ravi took Ganga’s hand and she let him hold it. Around them, they saw the expected condemnatory nods. They could hear the cutting whispers. Here and there, however, were also smiles and looks of solidarity. Like their brothers and sisters before them—across the ocean, across the ages, on the banks of the Ganges and the slums of Bombay, in the tea plantations of Assam and the fishery towns of the south, educated or not, living here or there—Ganga and Ravi were finding their way between past and present.

“The water!” someone suddenly exclaimed. “It’s everywhere.”

“Oh, you’ve got a real river out there.”

The pumps had failed. Instead of forcing the river back under
ground into its expected path, the water was overflowing the little banks, running free for the first time, bubbling, splashing, sparkling in the sun.

Ganga tasted something then. Her tears, falling freely, were sweet. She felt alive and strong and divine. She would be the mother she meant to be. For his part, Ravi felt a sense of freedom standing next to his wife and his soon-to-be-born daughter that exhilarated him. In the commotion, Ravi and Ganga just stood still. He held her gaze and she did his. Between them they felt something new and powerful that bound them to each other and to their daughter for the first time. They didn’t know then that they would name their daughter Medha, which meant wisdom, because her very being had taught them so much. And because Medha was also another name for the lost river Saraswati, the first river of sand, the one whose path lay buried for millennia and that would run free again when love was restored to the world.
In interviews, Yevgeni said he had a hundred children: Yuri, the seven books, the forty-nine orphans already held by the community, and all the ones waiting to be found, the children who hadn’t yet been interviewed, fed, finally loved as only he could teach them to be loved. The petite brunette sent yesterday as a special correspondent from the State News Channel had tucked her hair behind her ear at this answer and looked over the community to avoid meeting his eyes. He didn’t mind her turning away; he was proud of the view. The circular homes, painted in primary colors, and their broomlike roofs, the narrow paths of hexagonal paving stones, the surrounding grasses and slight hills already thickened with ice clumps and dustings of snow. At the edge of their land stood the church, dark and wooly, lined with gold frames and wax drippings, that he’d built with the other fathers and his own broad hands. “When we came here,” he said, “there was nothing—just an idea I had and the wood we salvaged from the abandoned government projects in Kostoma. The Soviets fell but we rose.” He used this line almost every time.

“And how long before you started taking the orphans in?” she asked, still looking over the stiffened grass.

“Within a year,” he said, “I found three.” She was recording this for a segment on a mentoring program to be established in Moscow. “It took another couple of years before officials started to recognize the orphan problem and donations began in earnest. We really expanded then. I wrote about it in my second book—have you read my books?”

“The first few,” she said, “yes.”

Pointing, he directed her eyes toward the church. “We bussed a priest in to consecrate the site in ’94,” he said. “Are you a believer?” She looked young enough to be. Squinting at the edge of the property, she shook her head.

“Me neither,” he said genially, “I love my children. There’s no room left for any God.” The girl turned her lipsticked mouth back in his direction and went on to her next prepared question, but he’d kept looking out across the lawn.
His son, his books, the orphans here and there. Except when a journalist came to them, or when he acted as tour guide to potential benefactors, Yevgeni was hardly able to stay a night in the community. He always seemed to be packing up his razor and toothbrush, catching a bus to a train to the airport, settling into a sticky chair and accepting a cup of tea from some on-set assistant. He tried, then, to carry home with him: a worn photo of Yuri smiling lay behind his credit cards in his wallet. Yevgeni buzzed his hair himself in hotel bathrooms and thought of Lara all the while. He wore ankle-high boots and a camo jacket lined with quilted black silk, so newscasters would make jokes about heading back into the woods, and in response he’d shove back into his interviewee seat and allow the jacket to fall open, crack his knuckles, clear his throat loud enough to make the microphone buzz. They asked him to come on and speak about the resurgence of communal living, or the homeless living in the cities. What did he have to say about the cities? He just looked up into the studio lights and tapped on his book cover and waited for them to be silent so he could talk to the audience about how to raise their children. The people understood him, even if the new elite didn’t.

The brown-haired woman with her microphone and camera lenses left last night, so Yevgeni gave himself the pleasure, today, of staying still. It was Tuesday. The air smelled of gasoline and leaves. He stood on his porch and listened to the splintering sound of frost as it melted on the grasses. He was wearing his jacket, half-zipped, with no shirt underneath and he still had on his house slippers, so the breeze blew against his bare heels and slipped under his loose pant legs. A black dog ran across the lawn from one cottage to the next, and then, a moment later, one of the youngest children, pigtailed, chased after it, her arms out for balance.

Back inside, he unzipped his coat the rest of the way and leaned over his desk. He smoothed down the next blank sheet of paper in his notebook and began. The land, he wrote, is a force, invisible but felt powerfully, and it makes our community great. It makes the children brighter and louder, their feet swift and their minds keen. He capped the pen and read this over, not taking his face too far from the page. His belly pushed, full, grainy with hair, over his belt. Finally he straightened and cracked his knuckles to search for socks and a sweater, pushed back the office curtains, jogged down his back steps and up into the house next door.

Lara was awake, too, preparing breakfast in the kitchen. Bacon on the
She didn’t turn when he came in, just bent her head for him so he could kiss her on the back of her neck.

“How’s our boy?” he asked.

“Lazy,” she said. “Still sleeping.”

He said nothing, just slid his hands around the looseness of her waist and down to her hips, which had widened, spread and flattened, after just the one child. Touching her where she was the most aged made him think of Tatiana, six houses away, who’d never had her own but had swollen in the same way after adopting eight. Tatiana was a golf ball of a woman now, small and round and lovely. *It’s not the birth that does it to them*, he thought, *it’s the mothering*, and withdrew his hands to pat his pockets for a scrap of paper. “Do we have a pen?” he said to her back.

She shrugged. “I don’t know where.” He’d have to record it later, whenever he got back to his office. She was chopping onions, pushing them aside, reaching for a tomato from the windowsill.

In his socks, he slipped upstairs, running his fingers over the banister on the way and marveling again at the dark, bumpy wood they’d gathered and labored over to form into this warm home that smelled like vegetables. Yuri’s door was open. The boy’s face was smushed into his pillow. His mouth was open, arms wrapped around each other. Yevgeni looked at him and remembered the months Lara was breastfeeding, when the boy, impossibly small, would rest a loose fist on her collarbone, having to close his eyes with the entirety of his pleasure. Yevgeni watched them and took notes, or spoke into a tape recorder: *Find the children*, he said, *when they’re young, so the parents will love them more like their own. Hold them in one arm and feel that connection that cannot be found when the child is not so childish anymore.* As he spoke, Lara would open her mouth and he’d hold up one finger to quiet her. They began to talk only after he’d turned the recorder off, and now he doesn’t remember what they said.

“Yurichka,” he said. “Now. Get up. Class in an hour.” His son groaned, curled his legs up, and threw the blanket off his body. “Get up,” Yevgeni said, and Yuri nodded against the pillow.

When Lara was pregnant in ’89 he’d slid his hands across her huge, impossible belly and said, “We should go away.” Her face then was a rounder, more speckled version of itself. She’d looked down at him like the moon from the sky and said, “Where?” During the first year or two of the community, when they only had the baby and some house frames and none of the media attention, he’d thought of that one word and loved her for offering it instead of *why* or *no* or *won’t*. 
Passing through the kitchen to the back door, he said, “He lives,” and Lara raised her hand in assent, her knife smeared with basil. Outside the mist was dissipating, the ground was damp. He heard a bird call. Yevgeni bypassed the winding cobblestone path and cut straight across the lawn to Gregori’s house.

As he stepped into the freshness of their hallway Gregori’s wife came out from the back. “Good morning,” she said, and added, “He’s coming,” when Yevgeni looked up. They could both hear his tread on the second floor, the low, rolling undertones of his voice. While Yevgeni unlaced his boots in the hallway, the wife stood at the bottom of the stairs. She touched the head of each passing child until all seven had been counted and then disappeared with them back into the kitchen. Gregori came down afterwards, smoothing his hair at the temples. “Morning,” he said, and offered his cheek to kiss. The men’s faces scraped together.

“My notes are in the other room,” Gregori said. “Tea?” Yevgeni accepted the hot mug brought by the wife and blew. “How was the interview yesterday?”

“Nothing to speak of.”

“I saw the girl when she drove up. Terrific-looking.”

Yevgeni shrugged, hearing the wife laughing and chatting with the children in the next room. “Sure makes it easier to talk,” he said. “You ever see the answers I gave to that one last year—to that old man with one ear higher than the next? I almost forgot my own name.”

“You? Can’t believe it.” Gregori pushed the ledger forward so they both could see. “There’s another press piece scheduled on Sunday. For an article in the Moscow Times. You could do it by phone.”

Yevgeni touched the collar of his jacket, felt its roughness. “Better in person.”

“Show them who we are,” Gregori agreed. “So you’ll have to leave Saturday morning. I’ll look up the trains.” He made a tick mark in the schedule. He was a fastidious record-keeper, an excellent right-hand man. Yevgeni’s own hands were so often full. He ran his fingers now over the smooth clay of his mug. Through the doorframe sounded breakfast noises: the crash of bowls and slush of spoons dragged through kasha. Gregori kept taking notes in his cramped, clear print, turning one page back and forth as he tilted his head over it. “Okay,” he said, and laid the page flat. “We got a call from a woman in Kostoma about an orphan. I told her you’d come and see.”

“Here? In Kostoma?”

“Strange, isn’t it?” Gregori said. “Or not. They’re everywhere. The
caller said she’s been stealing people’s preserves.” Yevgeni sighed and ran his hands down his stomach. A child shrieked in the next room. “Here,” Gregori said, “there’s the woman’s number. Her address. She said you could find the girl in her shed.”

“In her shed,” Yevgeni said. “In November. The old bitch. This kid’s probably ruined by now.” Gregori looked back at the ledger. Yevgeni thought, not knowing why, of their most recent adoption, the six-year-old sitting now in Gregori’s kitchen, the boy who’d been beaten into unconsciousness by a visiting priest at his orphanage and now refused to enter the community church. But he wasn’t an orphan any longer. He studied hard; he certainly wasn’t the type to snatch pickles from some stranger’s cellar.

“All right,” Yevgeni said, and stood. “I’ll be back in the afternoon.”

“I know it’s a day off for you.”

“Days off,” he said, and pushed in his chair. Gregori stood too, shuffling a little. “They don’t happen. You said it—orphans everywhere.”

“Even in Kostoma.”

“Even here,” Yevgeni said, looking to the door, taking his hands from the chair, checking his pocket for the keys. “The van’s free?”


Someone had turned on the lights in the schoolhouse and was brushing past the windows, pulling out the tables. Someone, probably Tatiana, had opened the door to the dining hall, and already brought a group of children in for buttered toast and cheese. He could smell the bread from across the yard. Yesterday he had pointed out to the young journalist everything here he thought would interest a stranger, but this morning he looked at the community and felt in his hands the phantom weight of a hammer, the warmth of freshly-laid eggs.

Before he came to the woods he’d worked in customs, but then the wall fell and he worked nowhere. Really, he’d already been on the way out before the first cranes were rolled in. In the beginning of that year Lara told him she craved salt, so he’d ripped open packages and flipped up boxes of clothes searching for the occasional tucked-away tins. She’d already redeemed all their rations stamps. He managed to bring home nearly a kilo before they found him out, moved him from inspections to filing to the street in front of the customs office with his pockets full of currency that soon meant very little to anyone.

While Yevgeni searched for the land, gathered wood and glass,
walked the dump looking for scrap metal, Lara sold their apartment for
the bit it was worth and stayed with her mother. When Yuri was born
Yevgeni sent for them, though the house wasn’t completed. “It’s not
right,” he said, “for the boy to be raised without me.” She brought the
baby in her arms through the eighteen-hour train ride from Moscow,
and when she arrived he looked at them both against the backdrop of
the yellow woods and said, “There should be more children here.”

He put out the word and the trickle began—phone calls, parents,
orphans. First came Lara’s distant aunt, then a friend that woman
knew who had been let go, then a girl from the East who had read
about the community in a newspaper article. Men came. Yevgeni, with
them, built the gate. Orphanages around the country were trembling
with the weight of abandoned children, so Yevgeni would show up, his
chin raised, and offer to take the best of them.

Was this where he’d wanted to be, eleven years ago, as a meeker
man, one less sure, a shamed border guard from a dissolved state? The
affirmation came after so resoundingly that it made him blink a few
times when the question even came to mind.

On the drive into town Yevgeni called the community center and
asked for Gregori, who came to the line after a few minutes’ pause.
“Does Jenya need more medicine?” Gregori didn’t say anything. “Or
honey?” Yevgeni tried.

“Oh,” Gregori said, and the phone rustled. “No, he’s almost all
better now. Just a seventy-two-hour bug.” Yevgeni had one hand on
the wheel, steering it around wooded curves. “I should have let you
know sooner.”

“No, no.” Yevgeni let his voice drop. The road turned again.
“I called the Svetova woman and told her you were coming. She
said the orphan’s there now.” Silence yawned between them briefly, then
Gregori said, “If you have a chance, we could use more sponges here.”

Yevgeni gave a murmur and hung up. He was passing more houses
now, ones that, after just two days spent in the community, looked
lonely to him—childless, separate and strange. Each with its own
yard, some with their own cars. He wouldn’t return with any sponges
tonight; it wasn’t his place to pick up kitchen supplies, and that should
have been understood.

The creased slip of paper on his thigh read MARINA NIKOLAEVNA
SVETOVA, 7 CHAPAEVSKI ALLEY. When he pulled up, she was waiting
for him on her steps. “Marina Nikolaevna,” he said.

“Yevgeni Stepanovich,” she said. The woman was heavy, wearing
a sweater, with her arms crossed at her waist. She took a step down as he approached. “The girl’s in the back.”

He followed her around the edge of the blue wooden house, its foundation exposed, and past two apple trees. When she opened the shed door, the girl was already standing in the middle of the cement floor, looking at them.

“This is the man I told you about,” Marina Nikolaevna said.

“Hello,” Yevgeni said.

The orphan swayed on her feet for a second, watching both of them, and then said, “Hi.”

The girl’s body had that wasted look he’d seen so many times. Her eyes sat dark and aged above swollen cheeks. The space smelled of moss and, faintly, vinegar. “Whose coat is that?” he asked her, nodding at the red parka she had on.

“My,” the woman answered from beside him.

“Thank you,” he said without turning. Marina Nikolaevna said she would be in the house. The girl was watching his boots, the shine of his belt buckle, the thickness of each of his reddened fingers. “How old are you?”

“Don’t know.” Then she bent to his presence, as they always did, and said, “Ten.” It was the jacket, the stare, that made them speak. When the community had just started, Lara told him he was a natural leader.

“Ten?”

“Ten-ish.”

“And where are you from?”

“Roshal.”

He didn’t know the town but he could picture it well enough, with houses scattered and tall thorn bushes, a town with few children, one wide street, one large monument. A hushed town, making sounds like the static on the radio, not noticing when a family is lost.

“And where are your parents?”

The borrowed coat was slipping off one of her shoulders, exposing a bare, yellow neck, like a plucked goose’s. “Don’t know,” she said.

“In the sky?” he prompted.

“In the ground. Don’t know.”

The shed was just as cold as he thought it would be. The five-liter jars of apple jam, raspberries, cucumbers, and wrinkled tomatoes made him think of the lab in the basement of his secondary school, with its fluorescent lighting and bomb-shelter walls. His son sat now in the day’s
first lesson at the community schoolhouse, in a setting as quiet, as gentle as Yevgeni could have dreamed of then.

“How did you get here?”

“Walked,” she said.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked, and she shook her head at the floor. “I created a place for children who lost their parents to find new ones. We live together and learn and work like comrades and when they’re older they go to university and move to cities and are just like normal again. Like they were never orphans at all.”

She shrugged.

“Do you want to go to university?” She didn’t say anything. “Do you want to work?” Looking at her, her child’s face and lips pressed shut over crooked teeth, he pulled a sheet of paper from the front pocket of his jeans. “Here,” he said, unfolding it, holding it halfway between them. “Take this. Read it out.” She reached and took it.

He’d met other organizers and educators who endorsed IQ tests, personality profiling, meetings between the children and social workers and officials from the government. There was no need for that kind of interference. He found this paper to be sufficient: вот кот, it said, которого зовут абрикос; voici le chat qui s’appelle abricot; HERE IS A CAT WHO IS CALLED APRICOT.

She kept holding it and looking.

“Do you speak English?” he said. “Any other languages?”

She was very still, holding this paper that had been held by so many children in the past eleven years.

“Do you know how to read?” he asked, and his voice was lower, gentler with her, more hopeless. Her shoulder was bare. He reached out to lift the jacket up and cover her. Closing one small hand around the paper, she snapped her head forward and closed her teeth around his wrist.

Her mouth was wide, steaming, and her teeth sank into his skin; he thought of diseases, he thought of sharks; he ripped his arm down. For a moment she hung on and she bent with him before he could shake her off. He pressed his arm against the drum of his belly, where next to his jacket’s shades of green he saw how stark the deep red holes were in his flesh, how purple the surrounding area was already under the wet and clustered black hairs of his forearm.

A bubble of panic swelled briefly in him, foul-tasting, then withdrew. Looking at his arm, he said evenly, “Who taught you to be such a little savage?”
“No one,” she said, and lifted her lips off her teeth. “You won’t teach me nothing. You don’t know how.”

“Put the paper on the ground,” he said, still looking at his arm. Not looking at her. She dropped it. “Now back up.” With each of her steps back he took one forward. He scooped up the slip of paper, the chilled cement floor scraping under his fingers, and stood. The girl, her back against the shining jars of preserves, stared at him. The coat was still hanging loose from her.

“I came here to help you,” he said.

“You can’t,” she said, “you don’t help nobody.”

He left her there, like that.

On the way to the van he knocked with one fist on the woman’s front door. His other hand was deep in his jacket pocket, where it throbbed like a jewel in the dark. When she opened the door he said, “I’m sorry to tell you, Marina Nikolaevna, that the girl won’t fit into our community.”

The women let her hand slide off the door handle and said, “Well, what can I do with her?”

“Call the state,” he said.

“Who there?”

“The state,” he said. It wasn’t his business anymore to know everything about that; his community wasn’t connected to the government, it was his own. The woman’s arms were loose at her sides. “I don’t know,” he said finally, “but she won’t work with us.” He looked out toward the road. The woman closed her door after a minute.

The van started immediately. He’d thought when he first saw her, small and swamped in borrowed clothing, standing fiercely in the middle of that shed, that she could be a child again—that they might be able to take care of her. But it was clear now that she was just another orphan.

Best to just stay in today and work on his book. It would be after lunch when he got back. There was little use to his interrupting lessons to supervise whichever parent was teaching today, or checking in on the pouring of the foundation for the new house. The community functioned smoothly when he was not there. It would, too, while he was.

This would be his eighth book, and sometimes, when he had a particularly productive day and put down before dinner five or ten smooth pages of unhurried and persuasive thought, he wondered idly if these were not the children he loved most. Or, if not most, at least as much as Yuri: each book was entirely his in the same way as the boy, pure, carrying with
it all that he wanted to give to the world, and so he never doubted them, and he was always proud. He ran his hand over the bite mark on his arm as he pulled in to the paved lot behind the dining hall.

From across the yard he could see his children’s heads bowed in the schoolhouse. Yuri’s small body was instantly recognizable, his shoulders narrow and fragile under a knitted sweater, his head dark, hair slick as an otter’s. Even from the lot Yevgeni could see one child turned away from the lesson and toward the windows and trees beyond; he squinted to try to capture a face, but the child turned away too soon. He saw pigtails. It had to be one of Tatiana’s; she loved to braid her girls’ hair. Tonight at dinner he would issue a general reprimand, and look in the direction of her table a few more times than seemed necessary; it was after one o’clock, their English lesson had already started, and inattentiveness like that couldn’t be tolerated. The child, whoever she was, would grow up and leave the community helpless if she spent her hours that way. She would be marked as an orphan wherever she went.

He came into his house through the side door, not bothering to check for Lara’s milky-smelling body in the building next door. After taking off his shoes he went to the sink and ran his arm under water, letting the throb subside, thinking of nothing. Yevgeni remembered the shape of his son’s bent head. He walked to his desk and smoothed the paper in the open notebook there but didn’t sit down to work yet. Instead he moved slowly, picking up the first editions of his earlier works and turning them over and studying their spines, opening the books and running his thumb down their lists of illustrations. He looked out the window toward the open afternoon.

The trees were a batch of pale paintbrushes standing in a jar, their trunks thin and limbless, their tops feathery. There seemed to be no movement within them. In interviews while he was traveling he called the community “a chance to return to the natural world,” but when he was here it looked like his own creation, where he’d thrown out the deer and instead inserted the orphans, almost as wild at first, bending to an offer of fresh food or a hand on their backs.

The community boys were outside throwing snowballs or, for the lazy ones, just handfuls of ice. Their lesson must have let out early. Yuri was taller than the other five in his age group and a little bit louder, shouting directions to them, urging them to scatter. Yevgeni watched his children’s noise shake the thin branches that surrounded them, watched as a parent came out from the community center and put a wide hand on one boy’s shoulder. The children began to disperse.
Yevgeni cracked his knuckles and looked at the wall clock: if he worked two hours more, then, all in all, except for the orphan shut in a curing shed, except for her teeth sunk into the meat of his arm, he could consider this a very productive day.

The light sank low in the sky and set the clouds aglow; the whole world was a tub of honey, thick and stirring. Gregori went out, blowing into his bare hands, and closed the gate at the community entrance. Tatiana would send her two youngest out at 5:30 to open it again, and reward them with cups of hot cider when they returned. Some predatory bird flew overhead. Yevgeni wrote about their canning of last year’s tomatoes, constructing the plumbing, soliciting four ping-pong tables from a donor. Make them work, he wrote, even the youngest, so they can understand exactly how many nails and pegs and shingles are required to grow a house from the ground up. They should sweat with all their lessons. He made a last few marks and twisted his pen around in both hands, trying to see how much ink was left, then set it down.

He didn’t bother with his coat to go to Lara’s. She looked up at the door as it opened and smiled at him. Her arms and neck were bare as she sat shelling beans at the kitchen table, and he lifted his arm. She stood. “Oh, God,” she said, her hands still full of green, “what happened to you?” He took off his shoes and came around the stacks of magazines and donated toys to show her. She took his forearm in both hands and pulled him closer to the windows’ dwindling glow. He purposely hadn’t looked closely at the wound since arriving in the community this afternoon, but a wound is what it was, a few front teeth outlined in ragged purple and red, two puncture marks left by the canines.

“What happened?” Lara said again, her head bent toward his body.

“Orphan today,” he said, and she murmured.

They both heard through the hissing and steaming in the kitchen the stomps of Yuri’s feet. “Yurichka, here,” Yevgeni shouted. “Hi, Da,” his son called from the hall. When he came in his face was a sharper, handsomer version of the pink-and-white blur Yevgeni had seen at play a few hours before. His hair was growing out from last month’s buzz cut given by Lara to all the boys over the kitchen sink in the dining hall. One day he might be as tall as his father, but for now he was a child, small-handed and with a pointed chin. He slid on his socks over to the table and stood next to Yevgeni’s chair.

“How are you, baby?” asked Lara, as she gave Yevgeni’s arm a squeeze and ran her hands down to his wrist. They both looked at
their son but Yevgeni felt her warmth from across the table and was held by it as much as by her thin, cracked fingers.

“Normal,” Yuri said. “They gave us borsch for lunch and it had no meat in it. Da, you should make them put meat in it.”

“We put in meat when we have extra,” Yevgeni said, “so we must not have extra now, and I can’t fix that.” Lara stroked the knob of his wrist with her thumb. “How was school?”

Yuri shrugged. “We got our test in geography back. I hate that class.”

“Let me see the test,” Yevgeni said. Yuri stood for a moment in place before sliding across the rough planks in the floor. He dug into his bag by the side door and pulled out a creased paper for his father to take.

There was a map of their region and the more northern parts of the country, Yuri’s loose cursive, sloppy on the page, a red “2” marked at the top. So he had failed. Yevgeni lifted his arm free of Lara and held the test with both hands. “You knew nothing here.”

“It’s just one test,” his son said.

*Just a test,* he said. Yevgeni stood up, the force of his body pushing back his chair, and hit his boy across the face. The impact of his hand on Yuri’s pale cheek, the quick snag of the child’s nose and solidness of bone underneath, sent a tremor up Yevgeni’s arm and made his new wound ache. Yuri sat down on the ground, hard. The boy started to breathe very quickly. Lara’s fingers were pressed to the table as she watched. It was one of the reasons he loved her so much—that she let Yevgeni teach his lessons when he needed to.

“Don’t make excuses to me,” Yevgeni said, “There’s no reason for you to be anything but the best. You’re not some orphan like the rest of them. You’re my child—you set the example here.”

Yuri’s face was a mess of splotches, but he kept both hands pressed to the floor. Yevgeni looked down at him. The boy kept trying to hold in his rapid breath.

Yevgeni sat again but didn’t settle there as he tilted up on one hip and felt the denim of his back pocket. So he’d left his pen next door. *Have a child,* he thought, *that will get up when you knock him down; you will have to knock him down; make him strong enough for it.* His arm still throbbed and he remembered today’s orphan. He was helping Yuri now, wasn’t he? Wasn’t he teaching him? He’d forgotten his pen, but later, in his office, he would write down all of this, and in years to come the people in this country would read it and speak of it with pride.

He laid his arm back on the table and Lara took it up, her touch light, her hands two feather dusters. She was breathing quickly, too.
Nobody spoke. Yuri was still on the ground but stronger for it all, Yevgeni knew. He turned his arm slightly in Lara’s grip and looked past the orphan’s teeth marks to his watch; it was almost time for dinner. Tonight they would have lamb stew. Above their community the sky was a blot of blue and Yevgeni took the kitchen’s silence as a chance to tally it up for himself one more time: he had a hundred children, and because of him all of them, flesh or paper, here or wherever in the country they’d be found, were growing up in exactly the correct way.
Past midnight, we are picking figs
    In your mother’s garden.
Hidden in the waxy leaves,

How easy to believe
    The houses are floating.
How easy to believe the heat

Is but a kind of lucent
    Bird that shivers a little
As it falls through trees.

Pure invention means if I could,
    I would let go of the self
As if I never belonged to it. As if

There was a story being told.
    Without narrator or audience.
The way I heard voices

One summer night
    Tossed back and forth in a field
Where there wasn’t anyone.

Herodotus tells us cinnamon
    Is harvested from the broken
Nests of giant birds.

I’m reminded that certain histories
    Are simplified
With silence. Others require
Speech. What can I say?
   Sometimes we
Hear a stranger tell our story.

Like a solar eclipse. When the wind
  picks up and the dogs begin to
moan. The temperature shifts, the light

undulates. And the houses, the trees,
  the dogs are all embers
of another world, invisible to itself.

Our pupils deepen. Made
   Thus anonymous,
We speak ourselves to sleep.
Richard Lyons

St. Vitus’s Dance, Teaching Hospital

It would be good to give much thought, before you try to find words for something so lost,…
—R.M. Rilke

We should think twice before we unpeel childhood’s humiliating documentary reel, its delicate cellophane sticking to the wrist.

The glue on a plastic model Buick smears, a heart murmur’s imperceptible hand tremor. The old doctor consistently hears my heart murmuring Gaelic tropes, intermittent drifts in the metronomic tilt, as if sharing his gift he has to detect nothing’s glitch on the disc of his stethoscope. My thin arm bent back to trigger some lever on my neck, I escape and the moonlight-slatted ward rears close

at the juncture of flesh-fleck and nerve-sick where fingers from the dark offer a paper cup, its timely sweet sip I can’t gulp fast enough.
Crossing Time Zones

Love, I can’t promise you much since the instant remakes us. An outside agent variously named triggers the curse of change, its touch. How can increments explain the way time rushes, since it trundles—in any of many directions—away from what we call the present—arrow or line, circle or sphere, since novelty may be just what requires more than words or music, past or pain?

We must snuff the self with its own accelerant. If we’ve learned anything, it’s that trouble burns even the immodest and indifferent. To be honest, love turns into surrender whether we stand still or gallop like horses. We don’t burn as the plane descends through a cloud and drifts. Our ears hurt and the infant-wails cut the sky. We touch down and taxi like a child’s toy to the terminal. The air is infinite and earth’s gravity exerts distinct pressure per square inch of skin, the body’s capacious organ as we learned in some old classroom, whether we rise or not, tomorrow and tomorrow, chrysalis after chrysalis.
You’re sitting on the sofa. Your husband is upstairs, your child sleeping. There are dishes in the sink with your name on them. A dark sedan pulls up to the curb of your mind. You know you should turn and run the other way. But you don’t. You stand there. The blackened rear window rolls down. It’s a boy you knew in high school holding a rose. The door opens. You climb in. Your husband upstairs doesn’t hear the car screech away. In the dark sedan, you find the boy’s room, balled-up gym socks on the floor. You climb onto the sheetless mattress. His mouth roves over you like a searchlight. Through the blackened windows of the sedan you see your husband come down the stairs. He’s holding a dirty plate with your name on it. You bend your knees and pull your legs back. A movie of this moment is being projected onto the vinyl ceiling. You struggle to breathe, the sedan accelerates around a corner. Your husband calls you into the kitchen. His words like a leash around your neck. You straighten up and walk over to him. The tremor in your shoulder is the echo of the boy galloping inside you.
Attention, Please

Ladies and gentlemen, your life is located under your seat, or under the arm rest between your sofa cushions. In the event of an emergency, slip your life over your head. Connect the clip and tighten by pulling outwards. To inflate your life, yank the red tabs firmly down. To inflate your life further, blow into the mouthpiece. In case of depression, life masks will automatically drop from the compartments above. Place the life mask over your nose and mouth. Pull the elastic strap. Remain calm and breathe. Your life supply is now regulated. It is normal that the life mask does not fully inflate.
Your Father Takes Me Gliding above the Columbia River

As an engineless aircraft, the glider, or sailplane, is kept aloft by naturally occurring currents of rising air.
—Field Guide to Gliding

At three thousand feet the towline unlatches and we plumb the sky, motorless: wind’s pinwheels, air’s architecture—

updrafts that might lift us over the ridge. He’s quiet and kind. What fault sent your life in its stuttering, a slipped nickel’s elliptic?

In the garage, where we left you, you’re sanding the quarter-panel of a truck, its rupture soon concealed under paint.

The altimeter winds down. We’ll have to circle back—all the wind’s hoops in my ears. It takes patience like lighting a fire, one comes to it little by little.

Our shadow crosses cows, oily eye of their waiting and drinking, men, stacked crates, fence gone rust-wasted and rotten. Banking again for the ridge,

This column of air’s sheared clean apart. We circle—as you and I buffet the other’s silences, move apart. Some thick, invisible wedge.

There’s wheat. Yes, at the ridgeline. It lives on rain and daylight and requires almost nothing of the farmer—more wind now than words.
Claire McQuerry

Your quiet, your flint:
I want to ask him is it in the blood.
But the plane drones no-no-no-no-no, air whips
the cockpit’s gaskets, we lift at once on some invisible arc.
There’s the river with salmon
flow and speedboats, irrigation canal, glitter’s
shrapnel across parked cars. I am already
thinking of the ground, not from dizziness, or fear, but only
because I’m always thinking of the next, best thing. The long
drive home, where light lodges its triangles and scissors
low in the boughs of apple trees.
Defeated by another universe show on TV, a dust of stars
poring the x-ray inversions of a thigh of Milky Way,
the man clambers for similars—
the cobwebs outside his fixed office window
which he exhumes mentally every day into a widow’s locks. It is not true,
he learned online, that hair grows in the flannel dark. Once shelved,
it is all death and little lights get bigger in the cloth of flesh,
if you held the corpse up, if you shot it with brilliance. Like burlap we would be,
thought the man, thick at the feel but bled with absences everywhere.

That curl of darkness crudding up the heavens made the man wonder if the web on the pane
would mean anything to him if the spider had stayed to tidy things up.
Alexis Schaitkin

Never-Ending Beauty

He motions to the red motorbike and says something she doesn’t understand. But it must mean, “Want a ride?”

She hesitates. She reminds herself that everything so far has worked out fine. She nods and smiles, and he understands that she means, “Yes.”

He gets on the bike, kick-starts it with a powerful thrust of his leg and pats the seat behind him, which means, “Hop on.”

She doesn’t need to tell him where she is going because this rutted dirt road only leads to one place, a village called Mae Dam. Christina was surprised when she saw the sign on the side of the main road, “Mae Dam Craft Village 1.2 km.” She had thought herself off the beaten path. The Burmese border was just beyond the hills to the west, less than a two-hour hike from the road. The villages tucked into those hills, small constellations of bamboo huts pitched against the muddy slopes, did not market themselves to tourists. There were no three-year-olds dressed in elaborate holiday outfits tugging at your shirt, saying, “Photo money, please.” And no scantily clad travelers handing out Altoids to the village kids like they were on some humanitarian mission.

At Dala’s, the only guesthouse in the area, Christina has been the lone guest since she arrived two nights ago. She eats her meals on the floor with Dala’s wife and three daughters. The meals are included in the modest nightly rate. Even Dala’s village, which is down in the valley, right beside the main road, and larger than the villages in the hills, has no restaurants or food stalls. After six months traveling the country, Christina has finally found a place untainted by tourism. She recognizes the hypocrisy of this: she is trying to escape her own presence, to experience this place without herself in it.

Yesterday, when Dala showed her around his village, an old woman with teeth stained black from betel chew held her upturned palm out to Christina, and at first Christina thought she was asking for money. Then she understood. The woman wanted to try shaking Christina’s hand. The curiosity is still mutual. It has not yet soured.

But the fact that there is a craft market at Mae Dam suggests that
all of this is going to change. It won’t be long before somebody starts selling chips and strawberry Mirinda and sticky rice candies at the turn-off for Mae Dam, and soon the neighboring villages will start their own markets and put up their own signs. Word will get out, and in three years Dala’s will be fully booked and twice the price, and Dala will be leading bamboo-rafting trips down the Kok to Chiang Rai.

Earlier that morning she had asked Dala what route she might take for a day hike, and he had drawn her a rough map on a piece of paper torn from her journal. He marked the villages with smiley faces, and told her to introduce herself as Dala’s friend. But she took a wrong turn somewhere between the first village on the map and the second, and found herself on a narrow trail carved into a hill planted with corn so tall she could not see above the stalks. When she finally emerged from the corn, the road was nowhere in sight. The path forked. Dala had warned her that the Burmese army patrolled the border. What would happen if she crossed it accidentally?

So when, at four p.m., an hour after turning right at the fork for no particular reason, she crested a hill and saw the road not 200 meters away, she was filled with relief.

And when the man on the motorbike, who was hanging out at the turnoff to Mae Dam with some friends, offered her a ride, she was still in the thrall of that relief, grateful to be among people instead of out alone in the hills, and she knew that the great danger of the day—the danger of being lost in the hills and never seen again—had already been averted. Besides, you have to trust people. Christina has learned this slowly. It has taken her a few months to loosen up. If you don’t trust people, nothing interesting happens. You might as well have stayed home.

The man probably expects her to sit sidesaddle behind him like a Thai girl, but Christina can’t imagine how she would keep her balance that way. She gets on the only way that makes sense to her—she straddles the bike, careful not to get the mud from her pants on him, and grips the back of his faded black T-shirt as lightly as she can. When they reach Mae Dam, he pulls over. A tour bus is parked in the middle of the market square, and a few dozen blond-haired people Christina guesses to be Scandinavian pause in their shopping to watch as she dismounts the bike.

“Khap koon ka,” she says. She reaches into her pocket, but when he hears the coins jingling, he shakes his head.

“Mai pen rai,” he says.
“Please,” she says, and holds the coins out to him in her palm. He reaches out his hand, but instead of taking the coins, he closes her fingers over them. He holds her fist in his hand.

“Khap koon ka,” she says again, and tries to pull her hand away. He doesn’t let go. She giggles, but pulls harder this time, and finally he releases her hand with a laugh. Then he turns the bike around and drives back down the road. Christina walks over to the market. Some of the Swedes are still looking at her, and she can’t help but feel pleased by how adventurous she must seem to them.

The vendors at the market, all women, are dressed in full regalia—bells jangle from their headdresses; their necks tilt forward under heavy loads of beaded necklaces. Christina’s eyes linger on a brightly embroidered scarf.

“Sam roy baht,” the woman working the stall says, picking up the scarf and pressing it into Christina’s hands. The woman punches “300” into a calculator and shows the number to Christina, then clears the screen and types “250,” indicating a discount. Christina smiles and places the scarf back on the table. “Khap koon ka,” she says. Thank you. She knows how to say so little. The wares at each stall are essentially the same, and after browsing for a few more minutes she walks back out to the main road. The group of guys at the junction is still there, but the one who gave her the ride isn’t. Farang! Farang! They call as she approaches. White girl! White girl! She speeds up until she has passed them. She starts walking back in the direction of Dala’s, which she guesses is about a mile and a half away.

The temperature has finally started to drop, and with her pants and shirt still wet from the morning rains she feels a little chilled, which is a welcome change. Even the rain here is tepid, like old bathwater. In the pearly gray light sifting through the clouds, the rice paddies on both sides of the road look like vast green lakes. The saturated colors of the rainy season leave Christina breathless. She wishes her family could be here to see it. They will never be able to understand from the photographs. She hears a vehicle approaching from behind and moves to the shoulder of the road. But the vehicle is decelerating, and soon it has stopped beside her. She turns to see the man on the red motorbike.

“Bai nai?” he asks.

It is a catchall phrase, the sort for which a literal answer is not really expected. Whenever Christina walks through a town, the people she passes smile and say, “Bai nai?” Most children know how to say it in English. If she passes a group of kids, they will call out, “Where you

Christina supposes there must be some sort of standard response, but if there is, she doesn’t know it. She smiles, points out in front of her, and says, “Bai,” by which she means, “I’m going this way.”

The man smiles.

“Kun majak aray kop?” he asks.

“Chun majak pratet America,” she says, pleased to have understood the question and to be able to answer using one of the few phrases she remembers easily.

“America,” he says, and his eyes widen and light up in a way Christina has witnessed many times before. They still love Americans here.

He asks her questions she doesn’t understand. Assuming they’re probably the usual things people ask her, she provides a brief biography in stilted Thai: “Here six months. Twenty-two years. Town Meung Ngam first time. Thailand very beautiful.”

After a moment she adds, “Chun cheu Christina.”

“Chris-tee-nah,” he says, lingering on each syllable until it swells. Her heart races a little at the sound of her own name touched by such unfamiliar cadences.

“Kun cheu arai ka?” she asks.

“Paj,” he says.

He has a sweet smile, she thinks. His face might have been handsome—he has the longest, darkest fringe of eyelashes she has ever seen, which makes the whites of his eyes and his unusually light brown irises stand out dramatically—but his face is badly scarred. He is wearing the same black rubber boots as all of the men around here, with dark cotton pants tucked into the tops. There are a few wiry strands of gray in his hair, but these must be premature—his face is boyish, his skinny frame still a bit tangled up on itself. What she notices most is the long scarf wrapped in several coils around his neck. It is embroidered like the ones in Mae Dam, but the colors and motifs are different, so it must come from a different village. The scarf is a bright flurry of pink flowers, lime green stripes, and orange curlicues set against a lavender background. She’s never seen a man wear one before, but it looks nice on him. It gives him a sort of bohemian look, although she’s not sure that is what he’s trying to convey.

“Bai nai?” he says again, patting the seat behind him. This time it is not just something friendly to say. This time, he is saying, “Tell me where you’re going and I’ll take you there.”
Alexis Schaitkin

But it’s the main road now, not just some little dirt path. She doesn’t know him. Plus she won’t be wearing a helmet. She smiles politely, pantomimes walking, and says, “chob maak”—I like very. He laughs at this, whether because her pantomime looks ridiculous or because walking when you don’t have to, for pleasure, seems silly to him, she isn’t sure. But his laugh is playful, flirtatious yet a little shy at the same time. He pats the seat again. But she shakes her head and he seems to understand.


“Bye-bye,” he says. He revs the engine, but instead of leaving, he pulls up even closer to her. She takes a small step back. He pulls closer again and again, she steps back. He laughs. He swerves away from her and continues on down the road.

She walks on. The sky is just beginning to darken and Dala’s is probably a little more than a mile away now. She is hungry. She hopes tonight’s dinner will be better than last night’s, which was rice and sun-dried fish. Christina had seen the fish at markets all over the country—brittle fins curling upward like old paper, delicate networks of bone protruding against the sun-scorched scales—and had hoped never to eat it. It tasted as bad as she expected—salty and potently fishy. Still, she is glad she ate it. Often the worst experiences make the best stories, and even as she ate she had imagined regaling her family with the details when she arrived home—the pungency shooting down her throat, the transparent wisps of bone lodged between her teeth.

She is their little world traveler. This means different things depending on who says it. When her mother calls her this, it means, “Our baby who thinks home isn’t good enough.” When her sister Mary, just barely older than her at twenty-four, says it, it means, “See how much traveling you’d do if you had a two-year-old hanging on your leg.” When her brother Leo says it, it means, “At least somebody in this family is out there enjoying herself.” And when her father says it, it means, “My brave girl.”

Everyone in her family thought it would be better if she traveled with a group, or at least with one other person. They didn’t understand that being alone was so much the point of it. People took a lone woman into their world. Protected her. Were not threatened by her. When you traveled alone you didn’t have to pretend to want to befriend other travelers, to buddy up with Israelis, Aussies, and Germans who would tell you about the rad things they’d done, about tubing drunk down the Nam Song in Laos, Happy Pizza in Cambodia, and the ladyboy shows in
Patpong in Bangkok. Alone, she could stop to stare at the way the moss hung from a tree like lace, or at a gilded stupa blazing in the sun, and a kind of drunkenness would come over her at the never-ending beauty of the world, and she would smile and laugh out loud, and sometimes she would even cry because her heart was so full she felt it might crack open in gratitude. You can only get to that kind of place when you are alone, and Christina is ready to feel things that will change her life.

This time when she hears the *tut-tut-tut* of a motorbike approaching from behind, her chest tightens. Paj pulls up next to her, grinning in a way that seems to say, “You didn’t think I’d go away just because you asked, did you?”

He speaks. Though she doesn’t understand him, from his intonation she can tell he is asking her a question.

“Mai kao jai,” she says. He says the same thing again. “Mai kao jai,” she says. Again he repeats himself. She is getting irritated now—what’s the matter with him? He thinks she’ll magically learn the words if he keeps saying them?

“Mai kao jai! I don’t understand. Mai—kao—jai!”

He laughs and she feels foolish for letting him work her up. She can feel a blush sweeping across her face.

He asks a new question. This time she doesn’t say anything. He fondles the fringe of his scarf, which she is starting to think looks ridiculous—a style affectation all the way out here.

He smacks the seat behind him insistently. “Bai nai,” he says. There is an edge to the words this time, and they curdle in her stomach. “Bai nai,” he repeats. Christina can only shake her head.

They stare at each other for a moment. Christina tries to make her face go empty and cold. Go, she thinks. *Please just go.* Paj runs his finger gently up the seam of a deep scar on his cheek. Suddenly he has softened again, she thinks—those imploring eyes, that shy smile. He is just trying to talk to her.

Then he speaks again, a whole string of words and sentences she does not know. Only this time, somehow, she seems to understand.

He is saying, “Why are you so uptight? Do you think I’m a bad guy? I’m a good guy. I’m the kid of guy who sees a pretty girl wet and muddy on the side of the road and wants to help her home.”

“Bai,” she says. Her voice is firm. She points down the road, ordering him. He doesn’t move. “Go!” she says, louder now.

He goes. He drives on, and she watches until he disappears over the crest of a hill out in the distance.
She walks on, faster than before. Her heart is pounding now. But she tells herself she has never looked uglier in her life than she does today. She woke up this morning with her left eyelid red and swollen. Some sort of infection—it looks like a fat grub atop her eye. The water at Dala’s is ice cold and she didn’t shower this morning. Her hair is in a loose, greasy braid. Her baggy pants are plastered in mud. The only exposed skin on her whole body is her face and her hands. She hears her mother saying so many times, “Not dressed like that you’re not leaving this house!” And Leo, trying to lighten things between Christina and her mother, chiming in, “Cover up, little sister!” But it makes no difference to Paj. None of that matters, Christina realizes, and it never did. People want what they want before you show up looking however you look.

She is cresting the hill when he pulls out of a side road a few feet in front of her, blocking her path. She yelps and jumps back, and he laughs. She wants her mother and father. It is a useless feeling. She is alone and must think fast and be strong. But all she can think is how much she wants to be at home with them and Mary and Leo, wrapped in a blanket on the couch, eating popcorn and watching old home videos like they do on those rare nights when all of them are in the house together.

“Leave me alone,” she says. She tries to step around him but he moves the bike to block her. She tries to go the other way but he is there already. He laughs. And though the laugh is the same as it was before, now Christina knows how badly she misinterpreted it. It is not sweet or playful or flirtatious. It is cunning. He is not driving away and looping back because he hasn’t made up his mind if he wants to do something with her or not. He is doing it to paralyze her. He speaks.

He is saying, “Where are you going to go?”

She hears an engine and sees a car approaching from the opposite direction. Scream! She tells herself. Wave your arms! But instead she just watches it pass. She is too scared to scream. And also—well, she isn’t absolutely certain; she doesn’t want to falsely accuse him. If she were absolutely certain, Christina tells herself, she would have flagged down the car. And if at some point she is absolutely certain, she will be able to scream.

She tries to get around him again. He drives in a loop around her and stops right in front of her. He speaks.

He is saying, “Don’t be so afraid. I’m not a bad guy. I gave you a ride.”

He laughs as he drives off. When she looks down the road behind her, she can just make out the car that passed growing smaller and
smaller in the distance. She clings to it until it disappears behind a rise in the road.

It will be her fault. If she becomes one of those stories, one of those pretty blond girls lost. Her father will watch one of the fat red Swedish men from the tour group at Mae Dam on television saying, “We saw her ride in with him. She was behind him on the seat.” And her father’s life will become a series of questions about how he failed her. Everybody in the world will think what a stupid thing it was for her to do, getting on that bike, and assume she must have been a generally foolish person. They will wonder, Why do these girls learn nothing from the ones who disappear before them? What is it that makes them believe they’re immune? They will see her photograph on the news. They will see her honey-blond hair, her dark blue eyes, her smile so solid and blunt it’s as if she does not have the slightest inkling that anything bad could ever happen to her, and they will find her smug and naive. And maybe she is. Maybe she was.

Five minutes later when she sees him driving toward her, for the first time she is not surprised. This time, as if Paj is comfortable giving her a bit more freedom, he drives along slowly beside her as she walks. She keeps her head down. Her hands are clammy and her whole body is hot and sweating though it is almost completely dark and it is cold out and she is wet. She breathes so shallowly her lungs hammer for more air. But the fear is in everything now. The sound of her own breathing makes her think of hearing his breath at her neck, just behind her ear.

Suddenly she stops and faces him.

“I’m an American,” she says. “If you hurt me they will track you down and kill you.”

But even as she says it she knows how impotent she must look, sees how easily he will slip away when it is over.

He laughs. His thick, dewy eyelashes flutter like butterfly wings. He twists a piece of lavender fringe from the scarf around his finger and caresses it against his ruined cheek. His body seems to Christina like two unconnected halves. The body of a farmer and the head bobbing with laughter are joined together only by that bright floral scarf. And at this moment, Christina accepts that the scarf probably belonged to someone else once, someone like her. And she knows that everything was determined the moment he first spotted her coming up the road.

He unwraps the scarf fringe from his finger and reaches his hand out toward her.

“Don’t touch me,” she whispers.
Alexis Schaitkin

He braces his index finger against his thumb and then flicks it against her swollen eyelid. He grips her dirty braid firmly and then tosses it away.

He is saying, “Disgusting.”

“Please go,” she pleads.

He is saying, “Relax, my brave girl.”

“Please,” she says.

He is saying, “I know why you’re here. I’m going to take you to the most beautiful spot in the world. And it will be just what you have been searching for all this time and you can cry all you want.”

He turns away from her, revs the engine, and drives on.

She can see the lights at Dala’s up ahead now. She wants to run but can’t. Maybe somebody would hear if she screamed. But no. He knows what he is doing. And yet she is so close. Christina wonders if maybe this was part of his plan all along, to give her one last glimmer of hope. She looks around her in the darkness and breathes in the cool air. For a moment she feels calm. She thinks that the lights of Dala’s do not look so different from those of her own house when seen from the road. Up above the stars are coming out. They seem to hang lower and nearer than any stars she has ever seen. She tries very consciously to savor their beauty.

Look at the glowing blue sky. Look at the peaceful hills. See the white stars.

It is her father’s voice she hears as she speaks to herself. He is putting her to sleep. Then she thinks that this voice is a sign of her surrender, so she pushes it away; releases it.

More time has passed than she would have expected Paj to allow. Maybe something has gone wrong with his plan. Maybe this is the luckiest day of her life. A peal of laughter rings out in the air. It is the voice of one of Dala’s daughters. She is so very near. One hundred meters more. She can smell the smoke from the cooking fire. And Christina knows that the rest of her life will be a straight road paved with fear, with the lights of home waiting for her up ahead in the distance, receding at the pace of her approach.
Beneath the Coca-Cola billboard, Gideon licks his dry lips. A Fanta would be three million—no, five million. He kicks at the pavement’s crumbling edge with his red boot. In the February heat, his police sweater weighs heavy on his shoulders. The green market vendors have the protection of the large pavilion, but Gideon has only a sliver of shade—this giant Coca Cola bottle. Better to be in Marange overseeing the diamond fields than at this Mutare roadblock. Rotten potato stink rises from the refuse heap to sit with the dust and bus exhaust. Gideon waves an overloaded truck to a stop.

“Mangwanani.” He grins at the driver, who frowns. “You have too many passengers. You want to give our road more potholes?” Two in the cab, eight, ten—no, thirteen in the bed. One hundred and thirty million, easy. Last month’s wages couldn’t buy two liters of cooking oil. The twins’ school fees just went up by twenty million. “If you want to enter Mutare, you must pay. Ten million for each passenger.”

Gideon’s right shoulder slouches, the strap of his AK-47 sliding just past his torn epaulette. The passengers pull worn dollars from the folds of their dusty garments. Mostly ten-thousand dollar bills. A country girl with a blue headscarf sits still. Her belly is swollen. She looks soft and round from her cheeks to her bare toes, which Gideon sees beneath the crook of a boy’s knee.

“Surduruka,” Gideon tells the driver, who hits the pedal so fast the people in back knock into each other, their hands waving the thousands of dollars Gideon didn’t take. He can’t let anyone else break his heart today. Too unprofitable. Scanning the roundabout by the market for the next vehicle, Gideon sees a ten-year-old Toyota—newer than most cars coming into Mutare, except the ones with white government license plates. Street kids dart out from between the parked buses and run in front of the white truck.

Children in the road! Edith brakes, wanting to close her eyes. She thinks she saw the rusty hood graze shiny skin. But the children disappear into crowded market.
In the passenger’s seat, Faustina cringes. The sudden stop caused a thump from the back: her sister Silent alone in the bed of the truck. Faustina knows how the truck bed’s hard ridges pound against bones when the old Toyota hits potholes.

“We are close now,” Faustina says, more to reassure herself than to let Edith know that they are nearing Mutare General Hospital.

“Yes. We were too close to those children,” Edith nods and almost loses her glasses. The steering wheel, the metal frame of the window, everything burns Edith’s pale skin. The hour-long drive from the orphanage roasted Edith, and her linen shirt feels heavy with sweat. She remembers the girl in back—Silent. What funny names they have here. And Silent is silent. She must see the doctor. Don’t they have midwives for things like this? What was it the nurse at the rural clinic said? Something about her hips being too slender, underdeveloped—the baby, twisted inside of her, can’t get out. Edith remains skeptical about the medical expertise of anyone at that clinic—which doesn’t even have pain relievers, only some cots and a nurse wearing flip-flops and a Protector Plus Condoms T-shirt.

“How far is the hospital?” Edith asks.

“Close now,” Faustina repeats, not wanting to breathe in any more of the dusty air and old cabbage stench. So much waste in the city, Faustina thinks as they pass the piles of old vegetables and eggs the vendors throw out as the sun goes down—too much unsold food for tired arms to carry back to rural homes.

The three billboards surrounding the roundabout signal the entrance to the city: for AIDS awareness, “Don’t be Negative about being Positive”; for Protector Plus condoms, “For the Love of your Life”; for Coca-Cola, “Welcome to the City of Mutare, Welcome to Refreshment.” And another police checkpoint—the fourth on their drive from the rural clinic.

Gideon smiles at the approaching truck. A murungu. He might make up the money he lost on the last car. He could threaten this murungu with charges for almost hitting a child with her Toyota.

“Maswera sei?” the murungu says, drawing out each syllable as if it were its own word. Gideon smiles. She thinks she can relate to natives.

“I’m fine, Auntie,” Gideon drawls. She can’t understand the sarcastic “Auntie,” but the Zimbabwean next to her does. “Where are you coming from?”

“Marange Clinic with an emergency. We have to get to the hospital.” This entire place seems to be an emergency, Edith thinks.
“Marange? So you have diamonds for me then?”

“What?” The truck jolts as Edith takes her foot off the clutch; the engine stalls.

“How long have you been in Zimbabwe?” Gideon leans in the window, the tip of his gun clinking against the roof. Edith thinks about the past few days—her first week volunteering at the orphanage—the dead rat floating in the well water, the hydrocephalic baby with the stick neck and heavy head, the orphans singing about a leopard on their way up the mountain.

“Ages,” she replies.

“Then you must have your driver’s license.” She won’t have it. Thirty million, easy. Maybe forty.

His face moves closer to Edith’s, and a drop of sweat from his forehead falls onto her forearm. His gun looks heavy—shorter than the rifle her husband Bill would take hunting but more dreadful with its splintered wood and tarnished metal.

Faustina knows the missionaries don’t like her touching the money, so she hisses at Edith to get twenty million from the glove compartment, hoping she’ll be discreet. She’s not, and red ten-million dollar bills peek out of the cream bag.

“Driving without a license is a serious offense. You may need to come with me, Auntie.” Faustina takes eight more bills from the stack and thrusts them at Gideon, who touches the brim of his cap.

“Mazvita,” he says humbly, smiling and clapping his hands in thanks. He sees the girl in the back of the truck as it moves off. Another pregnancy. Why go to hospital? She’s dead anyway.

The Herbert Chitepo Street traffic keeps Edith from swerving around the potholes as she did on the rural highway. The weight in the truck bed thuds over the rough pavement.

Faustina feels her sister slam against her back at every pothole. Edith stops too quickly and drives too fast. Silent should have sat in the cab. But she has a nice mat, Edith said. Faustina knows that the white plastic mat is as thin as a worn blanket. Their mother’s knit sweaters were thicker, a yarn waterfall of blue-green cascading over her lap to the click of her needles. Faustina’s needles never captured that rhythm, frantic but regular, like raindrops on an asbestos roof.

“You know what Titus told me?” Edith wants Faustina to talk and suspects that she has romantic ties with the head guard. Titus is attractive, for a Zimbabwean man. At least Edith thinks so. She’s seen
them standing alone together by the cooking fire. “Titus told me that in Zimbabwe if you’re driving straight, you’re driving drunk.”

Faustina scowls, staring at the road. The next hole in the pavement could swallow a child. She turns to the window. Women carry baskets of fruit on their heads beneath the Chibuku billboard. The man on the sign smiles with his beer: “Garai Machi-spak.” Stay Happy. A vendor on the dirt shoulder tries to sell the women blackened corncobs. Smoke floats off his grill into the palm fronds covering the tall fences of the industrial area. Tree branches and brush interlace with barbed wire, hiding the Mutare Bottling Factory. Faustina’s cousin worked there before the syrup shipments stopped coming. She and Silent stayed with that cousin while Lovemore died slowly at Mutare Hospital. She knows exactly how close they are.

Faustina breathes in the scent of burning corn kernels from another grill—three in a row with piles of small green mealies in between—no one can wait to harvest their maize. Before inflation, before drought, before his death, Lovemore would drive to Harare twice a day, hauling bananas and tomatoes from Mr. Cook’s farm to the airport. The fruit and vegetables flew to England, to Australia. Now the maize around Marange sprouts out of sand, and the stalks only reach the waistband of her sagging skirt. She knows Lovemore must have gotten sick in Harare, but she never believed that disease killed him, ate his muscles, made him thinner and thinner until he was gone. He seemed gone before that. His life ended when the war vets burned the workers’ housing and took Mr. Cook’s land. Even the banana trees are barren.

Railroad tracks. Another thud from the truck bed. A tall white and blue mosque sits at the big bend in Herbert Chitepo Street, marking the city center. Edith slows the truck by Jany’s Fabrics to stare at the traffic lights weighing down thin wires. Additional lights have been attached to the broken ones. Twenty bulbs point in different directions above the intersection. The bent, black casing plays with the sunlight, and Edith can’t distinguish between electric glow and the summer glare.

“What do I do?” Edith’s glasses nearly fall off of her face as she turns her head from the cross street to the light. The Toyota truck stops in the middle of the intersection. A combi driver honks several times before jutting into the opposite lane to go around them.

“The robots! Go!” Faustina points to another set of traffic lights on a pole at the side of the road. The red and yellow are dull. The third light beams a bright white. Edith stalls the engine again, struggling with the stick shift on her left. She hasn’t bought a car since Bill died; they always had automatics.
“It’s all wrong. The wrong side. How does anyone know when to go?” Edith hits the steering wheel with her fists to emphasize her words. Honks burst like fireworks. A policeman near the corner SPAR shouts, raising his fist. Stupid *murungu*.

**Tawanda limps in front of a white truck as its engine stutters.** His boss, Mr. Borster, said to be back by noon. The fence mending can’t be delayed. Someone snuck in, tore off several heads from the birds of paradise, and took a few mangos. Only a child could fit through the hole, but Mr. Borster doesn’t care. Slowing his pace, Tawanda strikes a Leopard match—just the right flick keeps it from snapping—and lights his cigarette. The Indian bottle shop behind the post office sells cigarettes for $500,000 a piece. But that was yesterday. Bread’s six million a loaf. Tawanda slips down the side street by the pharmacy with its plastic cross, dull and dried-blood red without its neon glow. The line behind the bread shop sinks down the metal stairs and into the gutter. A boy chases a lizard, weaving between the adults’ dirty sandals. A three-hour line. If he had time to wait, his leg would throb with pain. No bread tonight or tomorrow morning—the shops will be sold out by the time he finishes Mr. Borster’s yard work. If he takes a mango after sunset, Mr. Borster might think the fence needs more mending.

He reaches Robert Mugabe Road. Tawanda’s brother told him that Mugabe holds all the bread in the country—the wheat, too—and is waiting for the week before the elections to release it. Thirty more days. The loaves of bread will be falling off the shelves in SPAR and ShopRite. Bloody meat will sit behind the butcher’s glass. No, Tawanda can’t believe the President would do that. He trusts the Old Man. At twelve, he carried arms as far as Masvingo for the liberation struggle.

“Tawanda! Get in the car, now!” Mr. Borster bleats from his truck. Borster stops himself before saying “lazy” or “boy”; that kind of thing can start a riot now. That’s just what he needs, war vets putting more dents in his Peugeot. If Tawanda doesn’t hurry, that Chinese lorry will rear-end them.

**The semi-truck spits smoky black at the white pickup behind it.** Edith wonders why it has so much Chinese writing on the back as she coughs from the heavy exhaust. 11:12 glares on the dashboard. Driving since 9:30. Edith mutters, “Some emergency.”

On either side of Robert Mugabe Road, high stucco walls topped
with barbed wire replace storefronts and tuck shops under those slender trees with yellow blossoms. Skinny dogs bark behind the barred gates. A tall chain link fence encircles a golf course, lush but empty. Children run through a cloud of dust in an abandoned lot, chasing a ball made of plastic bags. The Vumba Mountains grow taller as the truck winds up Robert Mugabe Road. Mutare was once a tourist destination because of the Vumba, Edith read online. The baboons and other wildlife of the Vumba are gone. The people are hungry, Titus explained to her in that simple strong way of his.

Faustina marvels at the big houses peeking over barbed-wire-topped walls. While most of Zimbabwe starves, illegal diamond miners from Chiadzwa keep Mutare fat.

“Here,” Faustina throws her meaty arm across Edith’s face to point to the hospital. A crowd loiters by the open gate of the high chain link fence.

“More people selling junk?” Edith groans. “It looks like a market, not a hospital.” Faustina remembers when the hospital first ran out of food. The old man with the broken hip starved to death in the bed next to Lovemore’s. She would buy him bananas from the women in the shade by the gate.

Mbuya sits before a torn piece of cardboard with her tomatoes. She wears a towel for a skirt, pulling it low to cover the sores on her shins. When the last doctor leaves at 3:00, she will begin her walk to Dangamvura. No one wants tomatoes today. A man in a dirty suit said they were spoiled and bruised. But the prison guard with the sweet boy face might get some when he leaves. Mbuya smiles; her teeth are falling out one by one. That sweet-faced mukuwasha from the village will buy a tomato.

The broken road curves past the vendors and people waiting for combis all crowded in the shade of a Coca-Cola billboard: “Refreshment.” The potholes grow and grow. Faustina wonders why the hospital road, the way of the sick, is the worst in the city.

“The truck can’t take this!” Edith’s frustration makes her driving erratic. The truck drops into a ditch.

Faustina’s pelvis twitches at the jolt—but she has no one inside of her to protect. Her own children have left, fled to South Africa to find work and food. Silent has only one girl, no boys to take care of her when she is too old for work, too old for a man to love her. The truck climbs out of the pothole only to fall into another.

11:28—the digital clock is the only thing on the dashboard that
seems to work. Edith will miss lunch. Back at the orphanage, the matron covering Faustina’s shift will be distributing tin plates of beans and *sadza*. Maybe they will save Edith a plate.

Edith eases two tires off the road to avoid more potholes. To their left, ten men hack at the golden grass with sharpened hoes. Edith looks to Faustina.

“How prisoners,” Faustina says.

“Why don’t they just run away?” The flimsy fence around the hospital grounds isn’t high and the gate is wide. One prisoner seems to be swinging the shiny tool closer and closer to the gate.

Faustina nods toward a teenager in the shady corner; his gun looks heavy in his boy hands. Near the hospital buildings, a weathered man emerges from a wood shack to loosen the guard chain. It clatters against the pavement, and the truck thuds over the metal links. Edith slows at a sign that says “Emergency.”

But Faustina shakes her head. They must pass the box-like morgue and its small parking lot where Silent held Faustina’s hand while men with plastic gloves carried Lovemore’s body. They drive by a wrecked ambulance without tires to reach the maternity ward—the back of the hospital, where the white stucco walls yellow to a dirty cream, the corrugated roof a worn red. Faustina hates this place.

Edith hops out of the truck to help the girl. Now for the excitement of “emergency” as they race the girl through the hospital doors to deliver her baby. Maybe they will let her watch. Edith imagines recounting the story at church back home, standing at the lectern, wearing her yellow dress with the embroidered sunflowers. Opening the truck bed, Edith sees the thin lines of the girl’s thighs through her drenched skirt. Faustina pushes Edith aside and pulls the plastic mat, which squeaks against the rubber truck ridges.

Faustina smells the wards: alcohol, bleach, and human fluids, drowning all odors except for the meaty smoke when discarded waste is burned. She feels Silent’s light, moist touch on the back of her neck. Edith’s hands flutter about, unsure where to land. Silent’s fingers and palm are weightless, all her body’s heaviness has sunk to her middle, which drops into Faustina’s arms. She staggers back. Edith re-latches the gate of the truck—she wants to do something.

Faustina holds Silent against her as they shuffle to the stairwell door. The maternity ward is on the second floor. The lift has been broken for years.
Tinashe watches three women disappear into the hospital as he sits on the edge of a pothole. Flies try to land on his sticky hands. The mangos are browning, but still sweet. Tinashe plucked them from the grass near the emergency entrance. Maybe he should save some for Livi. He came to visit Livi, but the doctor said he could not go on the ward. Buda! Go home. Tinashe doesn’t like going home—unless it’s raining or he has something to cook. When the older boys stole the seats from their van, Livi put a grill in the open space. They cooked green mealies, smoke blackening the windows, heat burning the soft ceiling. But Livi isn’t there now, and Tinashe can’t light the Leopard matches without breaking them. He’ll finish this mango then see if the doctor will let him leave one for Livi. An explosion cuts through his thoughts, and Tinashe drops his half-eaten fruit in the ant-ridden dirt.

The sudden crack hits her ears and makes Edith jump from the bench in the maternity ward. The shot instantly dies; empty air hangs in its wake. The other women sit as motionless as the wood beneath them. Flies buzz around colorful but fading cloth wrapped around their heads; not even their short, dark eyelashes twitch. On the wall near the stairwell, a handwritten sign tells patients to bring their own soap, toilet paper, towels, and food. Silent doesn’t even have shoes. Edith looks down at her leather sandals, which she deemed worn enough to “ruin” on her service trip to Africa.

A nurse comes from around the corner where Silent disappeared on the gurney with a squeaky wheel. Her bulky figure fills the hall. With hands on her cushioned hips, she speaks quick but strong Shona. Faustina translates for Edith: “They do not have plastic gloves to operate. They do not have drips.” Shivers still ripple over Edith’s skin from the gunshot and the cool of the long, dark hallway.

“What do we do?”

“Find them.” Faustina knows this hospital. She remembers the high fees before she could take Lovemore’s body home to bury under his ancestral termite hill. These nurses tell varungu that there is nothing so the missionaries will go buy supplies, pills, plastic gloves, anything the nurses can sell on the black market. Maybe the nurses would help Silent if Edith weren’t here.

“But this is the hospital!” Edith groans. Her calves hurt from pressing hard against the gas pedal and the clutch. She wants to sit here and stay as still as these quiet women who seem asleep, or dead. The nurse should go.
“Sometimes supplies don’t come, or they go missing...” Faustina says softly.

“They’re stolen!” Edith looks at the nurse in surprise. Didn’t some kind of Hippocratic oath prevent that sort of thing?

Patience huffs to let the American know she can speak English. She attended Form 1 all the way through nursing school in Zimbabwe when it offered the best education in Africa. Patience shifts her weight. All day in these shoes, her hands deep in women’s fluids and this murungu accuses her of stealing. Did she fight for this? For this American’s suspicions? The paychecks have not come for weeks, and they worry about her stealing a few gloves? The gloves do not even cover her bus fare to the hospital. Do they want her to work for nothing? Pay to work for them? She raises her brows but lets her eyelids droop. Many of the other nurses are on a “go slow,” only working half-days.

“We must get the supplies now,” Faustina says. Silent is in the belly of this place—on that gurney with the squeaky wheel.

“And sutures. The doctor won’t operate without sutures. He lost a woman and child last week because we had no sutures.” And my paycheck. Remember that, too. Patience smiles to herself. Almost lunch and she has a wedge of cheese her brother brought her from South Africa for looking after his son.

Faustina wants to rip the nurse’s thick braids from her head. Another war vet. Stealing and smiling, but she won’t lose her job. Not as long as she attends ZANU-PF rallies and raises her fist, pounds at the sky, screams that Zimbabwe was born in blood. Born in blood! The slogan reeks more of death than birth.

Edith hurries as a kindness to Faustina. Perhaps Silent’s case is more serious than she thought. Edith speeds over the potholes, grinding the low underbelly of the truck against the pavement. Are there any pharmacies here? They’re called chemists, that’s right. Chemist sounds antiquated, not far removed from witch doctors’ herbs. Edith wishes she had her camera. A slide show would make the whole congregation feel the moment—maybe a movie night in the church’s multipurpose room. The last slide would be the girl holding the newborn baby. Maybe she would name it after Edith. That would be the perfect ending. Maybe the chemist sells disposable cameras.

Along Herbert Chitepo Street, many of the shops are dark, their doors locked. Even the open stores look empty. Behind Bata’s big front window, one pair of red sandals sits on the long metal racks. A
painted banner of vegetables and fruit decorates the whitewashed wall of SPAR—*Good for You*—but a handwritten sign on the door asks if anyone has cooking oil or soap to sell. *See the manager.*

Edith turns on the radio so she doesn’t hear the honking or Faustina’s groans when she slows the truck at broken intersections with disco-ball stoplights. But a car accident would make this a double emergency. Faustina’s sister is just having a baby, not a heart attack. She’s with the doctor; they are fetching supplies. Everything will be fine. The *mbira* music on the radio cuts to a commercial. A girl’s high-pitched voice through the truck’s tired speakers says a nice man is going to help her get work in Johannesburg. Sounds of slaps against flesh. Shocked, the woman screams, “You are forcing me into prostitution?” An authoritative man’s voice warns listeners not to trust people who ask them to go to South Africa. Edith turns the radio off again, pulling up in front of a building with a wide red cross above the glass door.

**Leonard raises his police cap and puts on his sternest expression** for the white woman who walks into the chemist. The President said he’ll get all of them out by 2010. Two more years. Mr. Cook beat Leonard’s father every day until the night the war vets came singing songs of liberation at the gate. Leonard’s father’s sweat had dripped into the fields’ furrows of round nuts and sweet potatoes for years. He is in the land. Mr. Cook only lived off of it.

The *murungu*’s Toyota is parked in front of the round, red and white sign: *Prepaid Only*. Leonard pulls a pad from the pouch on his heavy belt. The pen feels awkward in his large hand, which can wield a club in the city, swing a hoe on the farm. He snaps up the windshield wiper and slaps the ticket against the glass. The woman isn’t Rhodesian—skin too pale, pants too baggy—but probably American. He should wait and make her pay in U.S.—charge her extra for her country’s illegal sanctions against Zimbabwe. *The Herald* said the sanctions are choking the people to death, like this poor old sekuru on the street.

Brilliant smiles up at the officer with his good eye and raises his fist. Comrade, Comrade. “*Mangwanani*, brother.” The sun is hot today. The pavement in the shade of the tall ZimNET building is cool. His old back holds it up, but his bones are weak. The building could fall and crush him.

“What’s that, sekuru?”

“Hot today. No rain. No rain.”
“Yes, uncle.” Leonard laughs at the crazy sekuru. “We’ve had drought for many years. Have you not been thirsty?”

“The sun is hot.” Poor old man. He should be in the village, telling his grandchildren stories while his daughters-in-law prepare his sadza. Leonard slaps Brilliant’s hand and leaves a million dollar bill in the wrinkled palm.

Seeing the police officer, Tembe dashes across the gas pad and into Nando’s. Be calm. Zvakanaka. Tembe knows he stands out: six feet tall with dreadlocks flopping around his shoulders. Cut your hair, man, and grow shorter, the other miners would warn him, laughing. He has sewn four pouches of diamonds into his trousers since they last teased him. The dogs tore into them, but his long legs took him all the way from Chiadzwa to Mutare—just a few kilometers away from Mozambique. He’ll have to find the right buyer for the diamonds, but as long as he gets out of Zim. Here, people are dog meat.

“I want five pieces of chicken and…”

The albino with the Nando’s shirt and red visor interrupts. “No chicken,” she says from behind the cash register.

“But this is Nando’s Chicken!”

“French fries, sadza, Fanta.”

“I want chicken.”

“This is Zimbabwe, shamwari. There’s no chicken.”

“Okay, sister, give me the fries and Fanta. Rand?”

“Go exchange your rand for Zim dollars.” She wants him to leave.

His eyes look red from mbanje.

“The bank queue reaches to South Africa!” And the unfair rate will eat the money.

“Shh,” the woman hisses. Her face is red and blistered.

“How about oo-sa?” Tembe whispers over the counter. She looks around the store; 12:30 and no one. They demand U.S. dollars at the border. She could get powdered milk from Mozambique for the baby. Tembe walks out of Nando’s with a greasy paper bag.

The smell of frying potatoes drifts onto the street from the shop’s open façade. Edith’s stomach rumbles with hunger. Faustina repeats “sorry, sorry, sorry” about the ticket. The red and white signs are new. She has not been to the city since Lovemore’s death and didn’t know about the passes to park. Only illegal diamond miners and politicians can afford cars now. And missionaries.
Edith hums, ignoring Faustina’s strange apology, trying to forget that it’s lunchtime. She makes a wide U-turn around the median of swaying palms. A few combis honk, their horns barely sounding over the loud mbira music rattling their windows. Drivers with broken horns yell.

“It’s an emergency,” Edith grumbles. “I can’t believe they didn’t even have plastic gloves.”

From the front window, Shivinder sees the American park near his store. “Anjali!” He glances at the new rolls of colorful calico stacked on the shelves. But the American will want something for children—in bulk—probably for that orphanage. Navy and green for school jumpers and shorts, with the plaid print for the collars. “Anjali!” She is good with the whites; they like her perfumed hair. Shivinder is better with the blacks. He speaks Shona as if he were one of them. But southern Africa is no good anymore. He wasn’t white enough before, and now he’s not black enough. Maybe the American will pay with her country’s money. U.S. dollars are green for go; they get you somewhere. But the American passes the fabric shop.

Edith ducks under an exposed beam as they descend the six steps into the pharmacy. A man in a white jacket stands behind the counter. Another line. A frail, bearded man softly argues with the wide-jawed pharmacist. The next two people want pain relievers. Everyone here wants pain relievers.

Edith should cut in front—they have an emergency after all. But Faustina waits patiently. The seams of Edith’s pants irritate her skin, and she tugs at the material near her upper thigh.

Over the pharmacist’s shoulder is another photograph of President Mugabe. The same one that’s in every building: big glasses, Hitler mustache, “Cmde. Robert Gabriel Mugabe.” Commander? No, Comrade. They used to say Comrade here. “Communist,” Bill would have said. She’s next.

Edith plops the canvas bag of bills on the counter. Faustina draws in her breath, feeling the eyes in the chemist shop pressing on the money. She glances at the steps by the door where street kids now crouch as if they sprang from her dusty footprints.

“We need drips, plastic gloves, and sutures,” Edith announces. The list makes her feel important.

“No sutures.”

“I need sutures.”
“There are no sutures in Mutare. There have been no sutures all week. Go to the hospital.”

“They sent us here!”

“No sutures. How many gloves?” The pharmacist asks, his jaw set. Edith slaps her open palm against the counter and opens her mouth to argue.

“Ten,” Faustina interrupts. “And three drips.”

“Forty,” says the pharmacist, glancing off to the door. It takes foreigners so long to count. Faustina pulls out 750,000-dollar bills from the missionaries’ sack to keep Edith from flopping a stack of 10-million-dollar bills on the counter. She pushes a pile of fifty-four blue-green bills toward the man in the white jacket, who runs it through the counting machine. Faustina looks at the tarnished jewelry beneath the glass counter—some gold-plated hoop earrings and a dolphin pendant necklace.

A white mother and daughter come down the steps, the younger taller than the older but both equally pear shaped, plump hips and thighs. Edith stares. The mother and daughter, with pale skin and pointy noses, walk over to look at nail polish beneath the glass of another counter. Their toenails are bright pink. Edith remembers how Silent’s bare feet left a shadow of dust and little brown drops on the tiled hospital floor. She kicks the fake wood paneling of the counter, feeling awkward and uncomfortable, but stubs her toe.

“Where to now?” Edith asks Faustina as they step over the street children crowding the doorway. Next to the door she sees a sign, “I love you violently: real men don’t beat women.” A woman in a colorful skirt falls beneath a man raising a stick.

“The pharmacies have closed. We must go back.” An afternoon heat settles on the city. The truck doors burn their fingertips.

A white woman slams the door of a white truck, and the orphans laugh. They run to the murungu’s murungu truck. “Murungu, murungu, murungu.” They laugh. White, white, white. The smallest boy notices a Fanta bottle in the gutter. With two million dollars he can buy a cool drink. The Indian man won’t sell a glass bottle unless he gets another in exchange—or the customer must drink the Coca-Cola there and leave the bottle. The boy puts the bottle under his shirt—it’s hot and sticky. Maybe he can bury it in the rubbish bin by the Herbert Chitepo Street vendors. But if the mbuya with no teeth doesn’t sell her tomatoes, she will search the bin and find it. The other children are panting on the sidewalk, returning from the chase. He presses the bottle against his stomach and wonders where he can hide.
Mr. Moyse steps out of his electronics store to chase away the street child. So dirty. Mutare’s infested with them. He glances at the clocks in his store: 18:30, 5:06, 11:11. He calculates: 1:15. The passport office closes at 5:00. He’ll need an hour to climb the seven flights of the ZimNET building; the lift has been dead for months. Mr. Moyse taps his cane against his worn shoes. He’ll manage.

He looks up over the SPAR across the street to the Vumba Mountains, a deep, dark green. The lush heights look down on them, just ants in the dirt. Mutare Road rises from the dusty city into the Vumba, through Christmas Pass, over railroad tracks and past Rusape, must be 250 kilometers before it reaches Harare. His daughter is at university there. If she gets her degree, maybe she can find work in South Africa. He’ll need a passport to visit her—it can’t be as expensive as the others say.

From up the street, he hears a commotion and leans on his cane to look. Cars are lining up. Something at the corner of Mugabe Road and Chitepo Street. He squints so hard his bushy eyebrows brush his cheeks.

Even the deaf, blind man by the fabric shop perks up his nose toward the commotion. The street kids run past him, their bare feet slapping against the cement. At the end of the median of palm trees, Brilliant waves his hands above his colorless hair, his dark eyelids shut tight against the sun. Several combis heading north on Mugabe Road go around him, but the cars can’t move on Chitepo Street. The white truck at the front of the line is the only one not honking.

“He’s looking at me, Faustina!” Edith throws her hands off the wheel to cover her face, as if the old black man will crash through her windshield with his wild howls.

“Go around him.” Faustina urges, tugging at the fingers of the plastic gloves in her lap.

“But cars are coming.” And that man is still screaming.

Brilliant sings the praise poetry his father taught him and the English verses he learned in school. And then the war songs for liberation. And Comrade Bob. His songs grow louder, more important. The President promised him a cow at the rally. A cow! Or was that last year? The year before? Now not even a rooster wakes him in the morning, only the angry people queueing outside his night home in the doorway of the Bank of Zimbabwe. They come before dawn like ghosts in the dark. Must be why he’s so tired. “So tired.” And why he’s so angry. His stomach aches, churning around the nothing he puts in it. A cow is coming. “But I’m tired of waiting. We are all tired of waiting.”
Brilliant’s songs turn to mumbles as the policeman takes him by the arm. “It’s fine, sekuru. Zvakanaka.” Leonard’s large hand holds the frail man by his armpit and guides him to the sidewalk. Cars pass through the intersection, swerving around the Toyota.

“Go, now,” Faustina growls. A girl with bird legs sells cell phone airtime on the corner. She must be sick, too. Did Lovemore know her on his way to Harare? But Faustina won’t think of Lovemore now. She realizes the gloves are about to snap under her anxious tugs, and she places them flat on her lap. The truck crawls up the hill even though Edith presses hard against the gas pedal. The vines weigh heavy on the fence surrounding the hospital. They look like crocodile tails.

Tinashe kicks a stone through the hospital gates and chases after it. His stomach hurts from too many rotten mangos, and he wants to go behind the bushes. He kicks the stone again. The van he shares with Livi lies past the townships to the south. And the sun is hot for the long walk. He jumps back as a white truck rushes through the gates, the metal bottom clanking against the edge of the first pothole.

Edith doesn’t want to count the prisoners, but she does. They have moved to the hillside, closer to the morgue. Nine of them swing their sinewy arms back and forth, chopping at the tall grass. Faustina jumps out of the car before Edith shifts into park. The stout woman vanishes up the stairs. Edith follows to find the maternity hall still quiet—the women still waiting.

Silent lies naked on a stretcher in the hallway, a blanket draped over her hips. Faustina stands by the stretcher, positioned to shield her sister from the tired women staring from the wooden bench.

“Where are the nurses?” Edith snorts, turning to see the one with the thick braids emerging from the break room.

“The sutures?” Patience asks.

“Drips and gloves,” Faustina says, still staring at her sister’s face.

“No sutures?” Patience shifts to her other foot—both are so sore.

“The pharmacist said you have them,” Edith says.

“We don’t. Take her to Harare.”

“But this is the hospital. You must help us!” Edith begins to stammer. How can a hospital with nurses in starched white uniforms do nothing?

“Go to Harare. Her clothes are by her feet. You can’t take the blanket.” Edith wants to help Faustina dress Silent, but the naked girl
smells like sweat and blood. Faustina folds the hospital blanket by her sister’s rough soles. At the foot of the bed, Edith gasps. In the shadow of Silent’s thighs is a small blue hand.

Patience walks to the stairwell. The smell of amniotic fluid sticks around her wrists. These women interrupted her break—if sitting on a plastic chair listening to patients heave and groan can be called a break. The concrete steps strike hard against her shoes’ worn soles. The sun stuns her as she walks out of the stairwell and onto the soft, freshly cut grass. She wants the faint breeze to blow away the smell of the girl. Hurrying across the lawn, beneath the mango trees, Patience passes the morgue and the emergency entrance. Her fingers, filmy from plastic gloves, sift through the air as she stretches out her arms. She could fly, let her black shoes leave the red earth and rise to the top of the green Vumba looming above her.

A boy outside the fence is about five, her nephew’s age. Patience turns back to the hospital buildings as the white Toyota passes.

That girl won’t make it to Harare. A breech birth. Too much time has passed. Her uterus will rupture, the placenta will separate from the uterus, severe hemorrhaging. Her life will leave her before they even reach Rusape.

A white truck gasps up the hill toward Christmas Pass. Tinashe kicks another stone after it. He rubs his swollen stomach as he walks. Three matches in the Leopard box before Livi got sick and went to hospital. The next day one broke when he tried to cook the green mealie he stole from the vendor by the Chibuku sign. The second he broke trying to catch the shadow that flashes by the van in the dark. One left. Maybe tonight he will light it, start a fire in the van’s hearth. Close the rusted door and pretend it’s the cooking hut he sees sometimes when he smells fire and closes his eyes. His cheeks get warm and his tongue gets wet. No. Tinashe will leave the matchbox under the pedal in the van. He will wait for Livi to come home. A line of ants marches past him toward Christmas Pass, away from the city. A lucky one! Tinashe hops toward the red and black ant, careful not to let it pinch his bare toes. He walks around it in a circle saying, “chipo, chipo, chipo.” Luck, luck, luck. Tinashe leaves the ant and trots toward home, holding his belly with a juice-stained hand.
Blackberries

It’s tough getting them.  
The chromatic scale of black drupelets—

each a half-step note from reach.  
Have I ever said a prayer that isn’t tied to strings?

I thrust my hands through the inter-dental width
of thorns, those skeleton keys

hanging on the wrist of God. God forgive me
the people I’ve wounded

storming in
for the sweetest lump meat. You know how biting down

on a single seed
is a way toward something apart from itself? What I mean is

my hands are covered in juice.  
Like a swift freeing itself from the darkness, flying in circles, swirling upwards,

let me back up. God forgive me
the evenings I’ve wounded

storming out,
dusk licking itself in a corner.

They say God’s love is like a seed
lighting itself.

Lord, I love my country,
the blackberry thickets
Nancy K. Pearson

sucking in, spitting out.
Sparrow or swift, don’t we all

fall into aggregate darkness
for something?
Lullaby

Sung drunk, lousy song
sung worn-out. Song

pitched from a pickup
behind the Public Works Building.

Sung drowsy. Swaying, sang
and spilled the song

broken by the dog I loved and could not keep.
Sung myself alone

walking home in my waitress apron.
Song snorted—stung. Bandage

from the wrist of my past like a fruit peel sticks,
sung scraping it off.

The wash and repeat cycle song
I spun. Bitter song buttered

on my stepmother’s mouth.
Half-talked song,

my father to the screaming:
the shearer’s *hold-on* to the kicking one’s song.

Song: Enough.
Song song everybody knows one.

Song rewound like a butter’s churn:
my teenage yearn. Returned. Song
like a star appears,
and like a star appears the same

for someone else from very far away,
song heard through the concrete walls.

Song I need. Song I need.
Song I need. Appears the song

like two yellow eyes in a drainage ditch
where someone lonely feeds an alligator.
I ache for it sometimes, H, you and I,
a table laid with nuts and fruits and meats
more sweets than our wildest candy store
imaginings, already wide-eyed at our fortune,
stumbling upon that home, a life-sized honeycomb:
panes and shingles made of sugar, mint-stick
railings, gumdrop fences greeting us like miracles
after two days lost in snow-dense woods.

Wasn’t it like falling
in love then, the steady pressure stilling
yawning walls of both our bellies,
gravies, juices, jellies seeping round
our tongues, the stains of foodstuffs
on our hands, fullness gathering
to usher us, distracted, past her dull-red eyes, her rotten breath, her flesh
the color of something fresh-exhumed.

Later, she would shut you in a stable,
fatten you like veal. Later she’d fill a pot
in which we both could boil. And only after
I played ingénue then murderess
would all come right.

But let’s ease back
into that night, an hour into dinner
after all our basic needs were met,
when I reached for seconds, you for thirds,
the fire lapping at our wine-flushed,
sweet-stung cheeks. Have you ever let yourself
feel that way again, dear H, listening wholly
to your pleasure, ignoring all else,
heeding the body’s needy reason first?
Emily Pérez

Advice to My Younger Self: Fall

This is no father, man of sticks and splinters. A kindling heart, unaware that each match will catch its passions. Remember, it’s never enough to banish flint from the kingdom. A field mouse will reveal the alternate route to the hideout, the spinning-wheel’s spindle always arrives on the crone’s cart.

And this is no mother, woman of bread crust and broom dust. Consumed in mapping her shadow, turns her back while dogs and rats roam the larder.

It’s not that your songs don’t amuse. It’s not that the tricks of your little bird hands do not please or that you should search harder, run faster from forest to field to hearth with your harvest of seeds, extra mouthfuls for all, in your pockets. No. If the pond swill ever stills to a glass fit for scrying here’s what it might show: In the hollow tree’s hull, blind, furless kits hiss, as the falcon describes its circles. But in the room with no door, no one ever knocks or enters.
Advice to My Younger Self: Winter

One night you will learn you are soon to be abandoned, cast outdoors.

This news may cause you some alarm. Swallow it and savor those last hours.

You’ll have years to assign the anger, blame. For now hold them close. They’ll keep you warm.

The day will start with a long hike. You’ll receive a crust of bread, an afternoon’s low fire,

and you will take a nap, a few hours to believe you are still loved, and maybe you misheard—

But night falls, and it’s certain. You’re forgotten, left to freeze, starve, be eaten alive by wolves.

Allow yourself a moment’s grief for all that’s gone: your cat, your clothing, your warm bed.

You may even shed some tears, but don’t cry loud or long.

The cold will come; you’ll need your energy. It helps to have a plan before you leave.

On your voyage out you can collect, then drop along the road

the smoothest stones, the ones that reflect moonlight, make a lighted trail home.
Or, as the story goes, you could crumble up your crust of bread and leave a map sure to be consumed by birds. It hardly matters. Either way you’re lost. Either way you’ll wander into deeper woods.
Living Stations of the Cross, Good Friday, 2007

Because it thawed unexpectedly in March, because the temperature rose to 80
degrees for two weeks, then plunged back to 30, the forsythia and redbud are blooming
simultaneously for the first time that I can remember in my fifty years. Here
they usually bloom six weeks apart. It’s a cold Good Friday, hard frost that kills tulips,
azaleas, daffodils, everything flowering backwards and out of season.

Georgia, the “Peach State,” has lost its entire peach crop. But Baghdad is quiet, no suicide bombers. Today Roman centurions in short red tunics and gray, plastic, plumed helmets
and breastplates whip Christ down 9th St. in Lafayette, Indiana. He stumbles for the third time
and falls under the heavy pine cross, loses his crown of thorns. One centurion laughs, picks
up the crown, rams it back on his head so the thorns dig in, and bellows, “¡Vamos, el Rey!” Pilate

has washed his hands. The crowd of high-school kids in bathrobes, rope belts, and flip-flops has already
cried out, “¡Crucificalo, Crucificalo!”
Wind chill makes it feel 18 degrees. In ten
days, a crazed college senior will chain the doors
of a classroom building shut and kill thirty
people, then himself, methodically with
two handguns, a Walther .22-caliber
semiautomatic pistol and a Glock
9-millimeter. Before the slaughter, he
will first kill two other students in a dorm
room, then send to NBC the video
of himself pointing his Glock pistol toward
the camera, saying without expression,
“You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and
torched my conscience. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus
Christ to inspire generations of the weak
and the defenseless people.” Te adoramos
Cristo y te bendecimos. The bodies
of Christ and the two teenaged thieves, naked
except for loincloths, hang limp on their crosses,
turn flushed blue with wind chill. Their nipples are erect.
Their legs shiver, shake uncontrollably. Christ’s
crown of thorns has slipped down around his neck. It’s
a spiked dog collar. Eli, Eli, lama
sabacthani! Jerusalem’s women scream.
The golden forsythia’s cat-o’-nine-tails
wave in the wind. Raised welts of redbud praise him.
Zara Raab

Mattole

Long ago fierce wind drove redwoods from the homesteads. Far inland now, the groves. Dry, straw hills roll ahead like folds of challah bread sprinkled with cypress, oak. The wind whips your black hair into your face, between steamy breath and cold air. Hills halve the coast, halving again at each ravine the mare’s summer pasture. Like the land, we grapple. Our children skip ahead on lanes of loose gravel. I rake manure from sheds, you knead and bake the bread. We’ll eat when the loaves cool. But night’s building his wall, capstone of inky darkness vised by ratchet and pawl. How close the cypress, oak, pastures, and coppice, once night has fallen.
Christiane Buuck

Hot and Sweaty and the Things We Do for Love

The whole thing was my matron of honor’s idea.

“You could make an effort,” she said as we hung the laundry. “It’s not hard to find something a little nicer.”

By something nicer, she meant underwear. She offered to take me shopping. We were in France, and it was July, the month of sales, and since she would be my guide, I said, “Sure.” How difficult could it be?

Then my matron of honor had a nervous breakdown, which sort of put a damper on things, but she had planted a seed. The only underwear I’d ever owned came by the six-pack, and now that I’d cottoned to the idea of satin and lace, there was no turning back.

So I asked another friend, Monique, who is sixty but looks thirty. I had no idea if she was up on lingerie, but she was French, so that put the odds in her favor.

“Will you go lingerie shopping with me?” I asked. I said “lahn-juh-ray” like we do in English. Monique stared, so I added, “You know, the sexy underwear?”

“Lan-jree!” she exclaimed. It rhymed with ‘spree.’ “Why not?” she said. “It’ll get me out.”

This is a good time to admit that no matter how much I admire French women, I will never resemble one. Take your average French gal walking down the street: you can see daylight between her thighs. Daylight! Between the thighs! I mean, really.

I, on the other hand, am your average-sized American. The French mistake me for a German, or a Canadian if my French is passable, but I am too massive to be mistaken for a true Française. I stand a head taller than Monique, probably weigh twice as much, and my thighs definitely touch when I stand. This makes French sizing a challenge. Sometimes I can shimmy into an “extra large,” which is a 44, but often I’m too tall or long or wide. My hope was that lingerie would be simpler. Surely sizes mattered less when so little fabric was involved.

I imagined lingerie shopping would be a quiet experience. I would slip into little nothings in a changing room far from wandering eyes.
Monique would be my ticket into these places, my vocabulary, and my confidence-booster.

I had no idea that lingerie shopping in France was a full-contact sport.

“You want class,” Monique told me as we got out of the car. “You want Hollywood from the forties, you know what I mean?”

I nodded.

“Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner.”

I nodded.

“So you’ll want a bustier,” Monique said, counting her pinkie.

“Excuse me?” I hadn’t imagined myself in a bustier. Ever. Honestly, I don’t know what I had expected from this shopping expedition. A long nightgown, maybe, or a slip.

“And a sexy little porte-jarrettes.” She counted her ring finger.

I flushed even though I wasn’t even sure what a porte-jarrettes was.

“And a peignoir! A silk one that goes all the way to the floor.” She motioned long lines along her body to indicate how the thing should drape and fall open. “Your Dave is going to love it.” She always called him “your Dave,” and her French pronunciation transformed the long “a” into a short “e,” so it always sounded like “ton Dev.” She steered me down the cobblestone street, still calling out items. “Negligée!” she exclaimed. “Bas satiné!”

“Really, I don’t need anything fancy,” I protested.

She stopped, gave me a wizened squint and said, “Of course you do. You’re getting married. If you don’t do it now, when are you going to do it?” Then she caught my wrist and kept walking.

Our first stop didn’t look like a lingerie store. It looked like a good place to buy a girdle.

“Perhaps I can direct your search,” the saleswoman suggested, tilting her head back, the better to see us through her bifocals. Her stout build and the navy cardigan completed the kindergarten teacher look.

“We’re looking for underwear…” Monique began. For the first time that afternoon she faltered. We were surrounded by underwear, but of the most monstrous kind, all knee-brace tan and thick elastic.

The saleswoman placed her hand on a rack of granny panties and said, “Go on.”

“What I mean is fancy underwear for a wedding, bustiers and porte-jarrettes; that sort of thing. My friend is American, and she’s getting married in October. Bien sûr she wants French lingerie.”
I smiled weakly, uncomfortable at hearing myself described in the third person.

“Well of course French lingerie is the best,” the saleswoman agreed. “We don’t sell it here, but there’s an excellent boutique around the corner. All the best French brands.” Then she gave us directions to a store with a Spanish name.

The Spanish store was no bigger than an average-sized living room and crowded with thin women who seemed to know exactly what they were doing. They clicked through the sales racks, whispered to each other, held tidbits up over their clothes, and moved in strange harmony like a many-tentacled octopus. When Monique and I stepped in I could feel them shift in unison to get a glimpse of us.

It had been steamy on the street, but the unairconditioned store was hotter, and swags of mauve draperies made the place seem even more suffocating. I was having second thoughts, but Monique was on a roll now. She pulled me over to a curly-haired woman with deep cleavage.

“We’re looking for a bustier,” Monique announced. “Well, she is. She’s getting married.”

They vendeuse toised me. This how the French say “to give you the once over.”

“What size does she wear?” Monique asked.

The saleswoman toised me again and pursed her lips. “It’s hard to tell, the way she’s dressed. She’s big. She’s tall. Maybe a 40 or a 42, even a 44? Doesn’t she know what size she wears?”

“She’s American,” Monique answered, and the saleslady nodded as if this explained everything.

The saleslady produced a pink box and lifted out three bustiers. She laid them on the counter and gave a little sales pitch about the delicateness of the embroidery and the nice detailing on the cups. Her hands were practiced at making the rounded motions that signify breasts and uplift and support.

“Of course I can see now that this one is too small. Trop petit!” she exclaimed, whisking one away. She located a replacement. “We don’t do much business in these sizes, you see, but this one should look nice on you. The pink stitching will blend with your skin. You are very pale.”

I couldn’t tell if this was a compliment.

“She is,” Monique agreed.

I doubt I’ll ever get used to this Gallic honesty. Husbands will tell their wives or mothers that dinner was awful. Or a friend will tell you you look like hell this morning. Or a teacher will tell a student his
essay isn’t worth the paper on which it’s written and throw the whole thing in the trash.

“Pale and big,” the saleslady amended.

Monique agreed.

The saleswoman retrieved one last option.

“Oh, I like that!” Monique said, elbowing me. “Look at the flowers.”

“Well,” the saleslady said in a resigned tone, “let’s get you a cabine.”

I could feel the attention of everyone in the store, the careful clearance thong-sorting movements choreographed so they could get a good view of the action.

The saleswoman pulled back the curtain of a dressing room smaller than a telephone booth fitted out with a full-length mirror and fuzzy pink lighting. It was ninety degrees in there, easy. The vendeuse squeezed in with me and didn’t close the curtain. She said to Monique, “I’ll help her. These things are very delicate.” Then she told me to take off my clothes.

“Now?” I asked.

“When else?” Monique answered, and then she said to the saleslady and anyone listening, “She’s here for the total experience.”

I was not ready for l’expérience totale, actually, but there seemed to be no other option, barricaded as I was in a mirrored toaster oven by an immovable saleslady. I tried not to catch my reflection as she handed me the first bustier. My impulse was to put the thing on like a bra: hook first, then turn.

“Mais non!” cried the vendeuse. “Simply place the cups over your breasts and let me fasten it!”

Monique stared at my undies, aghast. “You wore those?” she mouthed, pointing to my eggplant-colored Hanes Her Ways worn to saggy shapelessness after nine months of studying abroad. I nodded and held the bustier against my torso as directed. Monique took a deep breath as if she were the one embarrassed. “You’ve got to excuse her. They do things so differently in America,” she said to the saleswoman.

I looked into the middle distance, wishing I could be anywhere but in this dressing room while the saleswoman fastened the bustier hook by excruciating hook. I tried not to notice the host of shoppers who had gathered to watch the world’s least sexy American.

The vendeuse shook her head. “Can you exhale, please? Your ribcage didn’t look so big when you were dressed.”

At this point I sort of detached from myself out of self-preservation. There was a lot of tugging and pinching and pursed-lipped head-
shaking, an equal amount of standing around topless, and for a time there was a little girl in the changing room with us, staring at me.

At last my saleswoman stepped back like a weary surgeon. She raised one eyebrow and said, “Not bad.”

Heads bobbed at the door to the cabine. “Pas mal.”

You will notice no one said, “ravishing.” Or, “gorgeous.” I think I heard someone murmur that my future husband would think it was “quite a change.”

“She’s got really sticky skin,” the vendeuse announced to the assembled. The word she used was “moïte,” which sounded a lot like I felt: moist. I fished around for my voice.

“Not bad,” I said.

The saleslady then said, “Of course you will need a thong.”

She bustled away and my spectators barred the exit until she returned with the thong that matched the bustier and said, “Keep your culottes on, please, and remove your shoes.”

Thong over sagging undies, sticky person in a bustier, we decided it all looked pas mal.

“How do the jarettes go?” Monique asked. “Inside the thong or outside?” She pulled me out of the dressing room so everyone could see.

“Think about it,” the saleslady said. “If you want to go to the bathroom you have to slide the jarettes under the thong. Otherwise,” she wagged her finger at me, “No pee pee all day.” She actually said that part in English.

The vendeuse pushed me back into the cabine, unhooked me, waited as I stepped out of the thong and whisked everything away, perhaps afraid the items would be compromised by any more time in my proximity. I closed the curtain at last and pulled my clothes and myself back together, deep breath by deep breath.

I’d been saving up for this shopping expedition but was in no way prepared for how much it would cost, sale or no sale. I numbly held out my card as I ran the exchange rate conversions in my mind. The saleslady looked up from her register and said, “What lovely earrings you have.”

I touched my ear. “Merci. My fiancé gave them to me.”

“He has good taste.”

“Doesn’t he?” I said, but the vendeuse was fussing with her cash drawer and Monique grabbed the bag and she pulled me right out of the store without an au revoir.

“We’re going to the super chic place next,” she said.
“You know, maybe this is enough,” I told her. I wasn’t sure I had the energy for another cabine experience, and I didn’t have the funds for any more fancy underwear, and I knew the place she meant. It was on a busy street by the post office and always had three naked mannequins in the window, which, come to think of it, is a pretty honest advertisement for lingerie shopping in France.

“Don’t be silly,” Monique said. “We haven’t even started yet.”

For the next five hours we wandered through every lingerie store in Pau, a number far greater than I had bargained for. By the end of the day I had spent over six hundred dollars, learned the vocabulary for just about every kind of intimate wear I’d ever need, and a lot I wouldn’t. Monique came away with a frequent shopper card for one store, using my purchase as the first stamp.

“She’ll be going back to the States,” she explained, “but I’ll be here.”

We celebrated our haul with lunch and then drove home where the shutters of Monique’s house were pulled against the blazing afternoon. Inside, we sipped glasses of water and sprawled in our chairs. We were still on the subject of underwear.

“You should get a matching bra and panties,” Monique said. “You know, something for every day. Look, I’ll show you mine.” She unbuttoned her shirt and the next thing I knew, there we were: Monique, and her bra, and I. “It’s très comfortable,” she said. “The only thing I don’t like is how it shows my nipples.” She poked her nipples and they popped back again. “See? And I’m just an 85 B.”

I told her I still had no idea what size I was, but that it seemed I had a big ribcage.

“Me too!” she said. “I have small breasts too, see?” She pulled her bra up and showed me.

There was something beautiful in this moment. We were two women and we both had breasts, and there was nothing to get all titillated about. I wished I possessed Monique’s ease with her own body.

Instead I said, “You’ve seen mine all day,” and kept my shirt on for once.

She waved her hand. “Don’t worry,” she said. “They’ll get bigger when you’re pregnant.”
Erika Reich Giles

Flight from Hungary

I pulled my father’s letter from the envelope. It was a page-and-a-half long, typed on thin, slightly discolored white paper. “Dear Erika,” he began. “I give you the story of our flight from communist Hungary.” Several months earlier, in the wake of 9/11, I had visited him and my mother at my childhood home in Billings and asked them to record their memories of those 1948 events that surrounded my birth and forever changed our lives. The letter, one of only a handful I had ever received from him, was his response. We were close, but he preferred to leave the family correspondence to my mother. This time, she had apparently relied on him to communicate for them both. His summary reiterated the few facts I already knew. But it moved me to imagine my ninety-one-year-old father—white-haired, long limbs folded into his easy chair, his blue eyes squinting behind silver frames at the Hermès Baby typewriter in his lap—painstakingly searching with his index finger for each key to commit the ache of those memories to paper. Suddenly, I hungered for the whole story: characters, scenes, descriptions.

For most of my life, I had known only the story’s outlines, illustrated with hazy images of my paternal grandfather Opapa’s overcoat, a bicycle, a bus. “Átok Komunisták” (Damned Communists), my parents railed during my childhood when discussing the upheaval that began in Szombathely, our hometown of forty thousand people ten miles from the Austrian border. Small wonder. The Communists who took over the country with the help of the Soviets after World War II reversed their fortunes, setting them on a course that culminated half a world away in Montana. But my parents volunteered few specifics, perhaps reluctant to tear the bandage from a still-raw wound. I inhaled their silence, wrapped it around me. With that silence, I tried to deny that I was born in Hungary, that we entered the United States as refugees, that we spoke Hungarian at home, that we were different. My father’s wistful references to the former Reich Gépgyár, his family’s agricultural machine factory, “Amikor mienk volt a gyár...” (When we owned the factory...), manifested a regret that clung to my parents, tugging them...
toward the past. I had no use for the past. I wanted to be like everyone else. American. And I succeeded. Only in middle age did the flickering flame of difference at my center scorch my resistance, compelling me to sift through my history, to reclaim my heritage.

Spurred by the letter, I questioned my father; my mother; my older sister, Judy. Countless phone calls. Several trips from my home in Seattle to Billings. My father, quite deaf, struggled to understand me, especially on the phone. It helped if I posed my questions—“What was Opapa like?” or “Who smuggled us to Austria?—in Hungarian. Still, I often needed to repeat my questions, or rephrase them. Most of my conversations with my mother, eighty, took place sitting in their dining room lined with shelves of china and crystal, dictionaries and reference books, movie videos, classical music tapes. “I’m not sure it’s good to remember these things,” she said in her vigorous voice, gesturing with hands gnarled by rheumatoid arthritis even as she answered my questions. Judy was five years old in 1948. She remembered tears and hugs, a yellow dress sprinkled with daisies. My parents remembered far more. But in the nature of memory, their recollections were fragmented, incomplete, contradictory. “Were you warned of the factory takeover?” I asked. My father said yes; my mother said no—though talking further, they finally agreed that there had been no overt warning. The story emerged over many months, haphazardly, in disconnected scenes removed from the chronology of events.

How did I visualize my parents’ memories? Black and white photographs from that era on their bedroom wall: the two of them, smiling newlyweds, her blonde head and his dark one inclined toward each other. Opapa in the only image our family has of him, clad in a dark suit, his close-cropped hair white, his narrow face unsmiling. My Omama, with hooded eyes and high cheekbones, enveloped in a fur coat. Other sources of information: a pocket map and book of old postcards of Szombathely my mother gave me; 1980s color snapshots of the Reich house and factory taken by a family friend; my parents’ diagrams of the house floor plan and the layouts of the two factory locations, Plants A and B; a copy of a letter verifying my father’s employment at the factory from May 1, 1932 to March 25, 1948, its letterhead a line drawing of Plant B in its heyday; A History of Modern Hungary: 1868–1986 by Jörg Hoensch; my own imagination.

My parents, Sándor and Vilmy Reich, had been married less than a year on March 26, 1948, the day their lives began to unravel.
My mother was eight months pregnant with me. Theirs was a union of opposites. My father was thirty-six years old, a bachelor. My mother, twenty-four, had been divorced and was the mother of five-year-old Judy. He had grown up in a prominent family, amid wealth and privilege. With his younger sister, Marianne, he was in line to inherit the two-hundred-fifty-employee factory that Opapa had founded thirty years earlier, where he served as his father’s deputy and my mother worked as the payroll clerk. She was the elder of two daughters of a Russian-immigrant landscaper and a legal secretary of modest means in Vasvár, a village twelve miles away. My father was reserved, polite, a perfectionist. My mother was outspoken, passionate, volatile. He was Lutheran; she had been raised Catholic. Perhaps it was precisely those differences that had drawn them together—he, seeking a counterpoint to a family in which emotions were held firmly in check; she seeking calm and stability after a failed marriage. Perhaps it was also a case of physical attraction between a tall, slender man with a trim moustache and a high, intelligent forehead, and a petite, shapely woman with a dusting of freckles on her nose. They were living with my grandparents in their stately, tile-roofed stucco house on a street lined with locust trees until they could build the house Opapa had promised them for their growing family.

The beginning of that day is lost to my parents, no doubt because it was like any other morning they spent eating breakfast at Omama and Opapa’s damask-covered mahogany dining room table. But its pivotal event is seared into my father’s memory.

Two men stood on a stage in the factory’s meeting hall that afternoon, twenty-five or thirty managers and supervisors crowded into seats before them. Ihász, the factory’s slight, unprepossessing shop steward, had convened the group. His companion, a burly, gray-haired stranger named Ligeti—eyes set too wide in a face my father recalls as froglike, repulsive—was in charge. He represented the Communist Party.

Ligeti spoke first. “Eddig mienk volt a túdő baj, a szegénység; de mostantól kezdbe, tieteké a gyár és magatoknak dolgoztok” (Until now, tuberculosis and poverty have been our lot, but from now on, the factory is yours, and you are working for yourselves), he proclaimed. Half a century later, my father recited his words to me without hesitation. He even imitated Ligeti’s delivery, his voice growing higher and more frenzied with each syllable. I pictured the man jabbing his fist toward the audience, his broad face sweaty, flushed.

Opapa, sixty-eight years old, listened impassively from the front row. A serious man, reserved. Perhaps he was reflecting on his life’s
achievement as a mechanical engineer—building a two-person machine repair shop into this major manufacturer of brick-press and steam-engine components, sifting machines, beet shredders, wine presses, wheat cutters, water turbines. He had created the factory’s original site by purchasing and building one- and two-story stucco structures behind the family home. Seven buildings containing offices, a foundry, and machine, locksmith, and cabinet shops eventually surrounded a dirt courtyard that replaced their back yard of plum trees and a vegetable garden. He later bought from his former employer’s estate a failing iron foundry two blocks away, establishing Plant B. Perhaps he was also thinking of the employees who had made it possible, employees he cared about even outside the factory gates. During the war, he had bought firewood in winter and given it to them to heat their homes. And afterward, he had distributed to them the cabbages, potatoes, and sacks of flour he accepted in lieu of payment when rampant inflation rendered the pengő worthless.

My father sat next to Opapa. Reticent like him, he also betrayed no emotion. Yet the factory’s impact on his life had been, if anything, even greater than on my grandfather’s. His childhood had been steeped in the factory—the buildings, the craftsmen operating the lathes and drill presses within them, the whir and clack and whine of the machines. He spent every spare moment in the shops, watching Törökös grinding machine parts, or Szabados casting them from molten iron. He asked questions, pondered the answers. After high school, he apprenticed in the factory’s various areas before studying to become a mechanical engineer like his father. He had joined Opapa after his graduation sixteen years earlier, working his way up from drafting to supervising a hundred employees in the iron foundry at Plant B. The factory had also led him to my mother—to love and marriage and a baby on the way.

The moments after Ligeti’s announcement are a blur in my father’s mind. But he does remember the mortal blow, like a hammer smashing a vase of fine Herend porcelain, that he dealt Opapa: “You are on permanent leave, starting today.” He was to leave the premises immediately after the meeting. He was to stop nowhere—not in his office, not in the shops, not in the courtyard. He was to take nothing with him, not even his coat.

“Are you sure?” I asked when my father mentioned the coat during one of our long phone conversations. From childhood, I remembered hearing, “All they let him take was his coat.” Could it have only been my child’s mind, demanding fairness, that had returned Opapa’s coat to him?
“I’m sure,” my father replied. “Opapa walked out of the factory with nothing.”

I was stunned. The coat, perhaps of black cashmere, a coat befitting a factory owner who lived in an elegant house with a grand piano and Persian rugs, had been the final vestige of all our family lost that day. Was anything left?

The employees sat quietly in response to Ligeti’s words. No doubt some, like Ihász, who was named the factory’s new manager, had eagerly anticipated this event. Still, they refrained from gloating. Perhaps others were shocked, or feared antagonizing the men. At the end of the meeting, Ihász invited the audience to stand and sing “L’Internacionale,” the Communist anthem. The group sang of workers arising, of abandoning tradition, of revolt. Opapa and my father stood rigid, stone-faced, silent.

My parents have also forgotten what happened afterward. Here is what I imagine. Opapa leans toward my father and murmurs, “Go back to work. Don’t let them think you’re intimidated.” He speaks to no one else. Slipping out of the meeting, he crosses the courtyard to the street. The March day is breezy, and he buttons his jacket and thrusts his hands in his pockets against the chill. Reluctant to share the news with Omama just yet, he walks several blocks on the route of their daily walk to the narrow strip of St. Stephen’s Park, namesake of Hungary’s first king and its patron saint. He warms himself on a bench in the sun and stares unseeing at water splashing in a fountain adorned with stone cherubs. His ragged breath gradually grows more even; the pounding of his heart slows. He wills himself to think not of what he has lost, but of the future. An hour passes, maybe two. The sun drops behind the top of the hill to the west, and he stands and turns toward home. En route, he meets my father, who, though shell-shocked, finished out the afternoon at work.

The two men find my mother and Omama in the dining room, setting out silverware and china plates for a light supper of bread and cheese with tea. Omama’s pale blue eyes register concern at Opapa’s sagging shoulders, his weary expression. She touches his arm gently, a question. “Elvették” (They took it), he says, slumping into one of the chairs.

“Jaj, Istenem,” (Oh, my God), she says. During their thirty-seven-year marriage, she raised the children and ran the household so Opapa could concentrate on his passion, the factory. What will this do to him?

For a few moments, Omama’s words hang in the air, articulating the dread they all feel. They exchange stricken looks.
“What now?” my mother asks, breaking the silence. Suddenly light-headed, she leans against the table for support.

“We still have jobs,” my father tells her. “They must have been afraid to go too far.” He pulls out a chair and guides her to it.

“With the baby coming, I can’t work much longer, but maybe you should quit, too,” she says to my father, her voice trembling with outrage.

“No,” Opapa says quietly. “Who knows what else they’ll do if you don’t cooperate?” He reminds my parents that they will soon have two children to support. But he is free of the Communists’ rules. He will start over and produce small farm implements on his own.

Omama mentions the modest income from her share of the textile factory and lumber mill in Austria that her father left to his seven children. And they have always lived within their means. The family will survive. But already, the lives they know have started to slip into the past.

My grandfather rented space from a locksmith and fabricated dustpans, hoes, and spades that he sold to his landlord. At the factory, the Communists stripped my father of his management position, relegated him to a make-work job collecting data, slashed his pay in half. He became a pariah.

I was born a month later, on April 24, 1948. The date was a Saturday in a town whose name, Szombathely, means “Saturday place,” referring to the market where farmers sold plums and dried red peppers, eggs and sour cream, live chickens and geese. All my mother would say about my birth was that she labored from morning until the afternoon amid crisp white linens and a red satin down comforter. I drew my first breath in my grandparents’ house, in a bedroom overlooking the factory so recently wrested from Opapa.

Did my parents link my birth to what they had lost? Or did they, as trauma victims often do, find comfort and hope in the birth of a child? I’ve never asked. Could any parent acknowledge that their child reminds them of their life’s most devastating experience? Instead, I imagine myself in their place—a couple still adjusting to marriage, to each other, to parenting Judy together—when forces beyond their control jolted their life from its foundations. And then, a newborn baby. At best, my birth must have been bittersweet.

On May 14, 1948, the Communists fired my father, perhaps weary of the reminder that the factory rightfully belonged to his family. He searched for work in similar firms, even in Budapest, a hundred miles away. Everywhere, the same question: “Are you a member of
the Communist Party? “No,” my father answered. They said it didn’t matter. But it did matter.

Whenever my parents went out to dinner, a blonde young man in civilian clothes materialized at a table nearby. They dined on chicken paprikás; he nursed a glass of wine and watched them. If they caught his gaze, he nodded politely. He never left before they did. A jeep emblazoned with a red cross parked several times in front of my grandparents’ house. Everyone knew such jeeps, though resembling Red Cross vehicles, were actually from the ÁVO, the Secret Police. My father worried that the ÁVO’s next step would be to rap on our door in the middle of the night—a common practice with people considered “enemies of the state”—bringing exile to a remote village, imprisonment, or death.

My parents were determined to avoid that outcome. “We need to escape,” my father urged his parents. They didn’t take him seriously. His sister, Marianne, did. “What are we waiting for?” she asked one night when she, her husband, and their teenage sons came for supper. Yet in the end, after weighing the pros and cons in the privacy of their bedroom, only my parents were willing to act. The prospect of leaving loved ones behind devastated them, but remaining in Hungary would be even more intolerable. In June 1948, my father decided they could wait no longer.

Chimney sweeps he knew led him to a border-patrol sergeant who smuggled people to Austria. My father eyed the khaki-clad man warily from across a table. The sergeant, no doubt accustomed to the skepticism of prospective clients, volunteered that if people wanted to leave Hungary, he thought they should be able to go. By helping them, he was financing his children’s education. A mutually beneficial arrangement. He seemed sincere.

“How much?” my father asked.

“Two thousand forints,” the sergeant replied. His fee, payable in advance, was a third more than my father’s monthly salary before the factory takeover. It would cover only crossing the border. In Austria, my parents would be on their own.

Germany had annexed German-speaking Austria during World War II. In 1945, the victorious Allies—the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—partitioned the country into four sectors, the start of a ten-year occupation. Eastern Austria, on the other side of the border, was controlled by the same Soviets behind the Communist takeover of Hungary. Omama’s relatives living there could help with shelter and transportation. But they were no guarantee against the Soviets, who
actively hunted escapees from Hungary and sent those they caught back to the ÁVO. We would be safe only at our final destination, Rohrbach, in the British sector, twenty-five miles inside Austria. The facts distressed my father, but time was running out. He agreed to the man’s terms.

The sergeant considered several escape possibilities, finally settling on a family picnic in the countryside near the border. After my parents gathered up the remnants, he would guide us across. He set no date. We would go when he deemed the conditions favorable.

Meanwhile, my father brooded. Could he trust the sergeant? Was his plan sound? He decided to consult a clairvoyant. She was the widow of a colonel in the pre-Soviet Hungarian army and could be entrusted with his secret. The tall, middle-aged woman welcomed him into her apartment near the railroad station. He told her the escape plan. Would he and his family get out of Hungary safely? She thought for a few moments. “Yes,” she said. My father left, relieved.

The subject of the clairvoyant came up late in my inquiry. My father mentioned her almost as an afterthought, sitting across from me in his easy chair, surrounded by Hungarian paintings, photographs, ceramics, books. Learning of the consultation, so out of character for the serious, rational person I knew, underscored for me just how wrenching the decision to escape had been for my parents, how laden with anxiety and doubt.

Soon after the seer allayed my father’s worries, the sergeant contacted him. A complication. We couldn’t go as a family after all; it would look too suspicious. On June 21, 1948, he would guide my father and Judy across the border by bicycle. He would take my mother, carrying me, the next day by bus.

My parents took a final stroll around Szombathely on Sunday evening, June 20. From their neighborhood on the town’s western edge, they crossed over the Perint River, the setting sun at their backs. They passed whitewashed houses with terra-cotta roofs on a street named for Petőfi Sándor, the revered 19th century poet, champion of the freedom and self-determination Hungary was rapidly losing under the Communists. Two miles across town, they paused at the railroad station, a Renaissance-style building with turrets and arched windows. A cluster of perhaps twenty people sat on suitcases in front: children, young adults, gray-haired older people. Ashen, anxious faces. Guarding them were two soldiers with rifles. They had been captured at the border, trying to escape.

Afterward, my shaken parents drank white wine spritzers on the
Erika Reich Giles

patio of the Mega Pince, a favorite bistro. Rustling trees, a darkening sky. Lights twinkled on in buildings soon to exist only in their memories. A black-clad gypsy band entertained with melancholy strains from fiddles and a cimbalom, a Hungarian dulcimer. My father requested a ballad: “I’ll soon leave your village.” According to custom, he sang along—of moving to another country, of love and loss and regret. Their blonde stalker watched and listened. My mother was terrified that he would catch on and arrest them. Perhaps my father needed to display that bravado to bolster their courage, to strengthen their resolve, to erase from their minds the faces at the railroad station.

June 21st dawned sunny and warm. My father was in shirtsleeves, a man on a bike ride with his daughter and a soldier friend. Judy, in her yellow dress, her blonde hair bobbed, perched between him and the handlebars of the beat-up bicycle he had borrowed from a nephew. My parents had told her nothing, for fear she would blurt out their plans. Only at the last minute had they taken her to Vasvár to say goodbye to our maternal grandparents: petite Nagymama with her ready smile, and Nagypapa, outwardly gruff, but devoted to his granddaughter. Before my parents’ marriage, they had cared for Judy while our mother worked at the factory and even afterward, she visited them as often as possible. Judy hugged the grandparents who dominated her earliest memories and wondered why they clung to her, sobbing. To then go with my father, whom she was only beginning to trust as a parent, and the sergeant, a stranger, must have disturbed her even more. But she was an obedient child. She didn’t resist. She didn’t ask questions.

On their way out of town, the trio encountered two factory employees, one on a street near home, the other on the outskirts. “Good day,” my father greeted each man, with forced heartiness. Sweaty palms gripping the handlebars, he willed them to believe he and his companions were embarking on nothing more than a summer outing. Both returned his greeting and kept walking.

My father and the sergeant pedaled to Austria on a road lined with cornfields and pastures scattered with groves of deciduous trees and an occasional thatch-roofed stucco farmhouse. After several miles, a border guard. I imagine him as tall, with steely blue eyes. “Identify yourself,” he commanded. My father handed over his driver’s license. “Your destination?” Responding exactly as the sergeant had instructed him, my father named a town still in Hungary. The guard studied the license, gazed into my father’s eyes, studied the license
again. Was he in collusion with the sergeant, merely going through the
motions? Or was he in fact weighing whether to send them back? After
several excruciating minutes, minutes in which my father prayed the
clairvoyant knew her business, the man allowed them to pass.

Two hours after setting out, they skirted the village of Pornóapáti
and crossed a meadow to the border, the Pinka River. A footbridge
spanned the narrow, ditch-like channel; an Austrian guard patrolled
the far side. My father, fluent in German as well as Hungarian,
translated as the sergeant chatted with the friendly man. Soon, the
guard waved my father and Judy on into Austria as the sergeant
turned back to Hungary. With my father speaking German and
Judy remaining silent, they passed as Austrians until they reached
a relative’s home in Grosspetersdorf, six miles away. The next day,
another relative drove them fourteen miles to the home of Omama’s
sister-in-law in Pinkafeld, a haven to wait for my mother and me.

On the morning of June 22, my mother donned a white blouse,
navy blue jacket, and a matching print skirt, an outfit a young matron
might wear to run errands. She swathed me in a white bunting and
criedled me in her arms. By 7:30, she waited with the sergeant on a street
near my grandparents’ house for the bus to the border. He guarded
her lone brown suitcase. Numerous factory employees trudged past en
route to work. Most averted their eyes; none greeted my mother. “After
the takeover, they shunned me as if I had leprosy,” she told me sadly. A
more pressing concern: did they suspect she was fleeing? Most knew the
destination of the bus that stopped there. She dismissed the thought. No
sane person would try to escape carrying a two-month-old baby.

I slept, oblivious. I was leaving the only environment I knew—
Omama and Opapa’s house; their creased, smiling faces bending
over me; the dapple of sunlight streaming through lace-curtained
windows; the honeyed fragrance of locust blossoms outside our door;
the ever-present buzz of the factory—and would remember nothing.
Our departure created for me a void that encompassed not only a
house and its inhabitants, but also a town, a country, a way of life.

On the bus, my mother chose a window seat. She avoided talking
to the sergeant, whom she considered mercenary. Instead, she watched
Szombathely’s buildings give way to the same fields my father and
Judy had passed the day before. Perhaps she glanced at my slumbering
face, stroked wisps of my blonde hair. She tried not to think about the
people at the railroad station.

The bus lumbered into Pornóapáti, a cluster of wretched houses.
The sergeant led my mother to one, the dirt-floored home of middle-aged peasants. He handed them our suitcase. It contained little of value, just changes of clothing, some linens and towels. Still, my mother objected that it wasn’t going along. The sergeant told her it would only attract attention, arouse suspicion. Better to leave it behind. He would have it delivered when we arrived in Rohrbach. He then escorted her, clutching me, across the Pinka River on an unguarded a bridge a mile or two north of where my father and sister had crossed.

Another house, brick, with modern farm equipment in the yard. A couple, several children. Before leaving, the sergeant instructed the husband to call Omama’s brother in Pinkafeld and ask him to fetch us. My mother waited in the house, cuddling me in her lap. “They ignored us,” she said of the family, an edge to her voice. Hours passed. No one came. The couple grew nervous. What would happen to them if they were caught harboring Hungarian escapees? They finally put us on a yellow postal bus to Oberwart, fourteen miles away. From there, a second bus would take us the five miles to Pinkafeld. The Oberwart bus stopped in several villages en route. In one, a dark-haired man a few years older than my mother boarded. He sat down beside us, studied my mother and me.

“Most jöttek át a határon?” (Did you just cross the border?) he whispered. Startled, my mother met his gaze. How did he guess? And why was he speaking Hungarian, instead of German? Was he a Soviet spy? Perhaps his eyes were kind. Perhaps he patted me gently.

“Meg látsik?” (Is it that obvious?) she asked. She thought she had concealed her hesitation, her fear.

The stranger, who often traveled the route in his work as a roofer, was also bound for Pinkafeld, his home. He warned of danger in Oberwart. Soviet soldiers checked the identity of everyone boarding the Pinkafeld bus. My mother’s heart sank. Had she brought us this far, only to be sent back to the ÁVO? The man, sensing her distress, offered his mother’s home in Oberwart as a place to rest, to tend to me, to plot how to outsmart the Soviets.

Entering the small house on the main square with her companion, my mother relaxed. A slender, dark-haired woman with a remarkable resemblance to her own mother welcomed us warmly. She cooed over me as my mother fed me and changed my diapers. Her son considered strategies to get us on the bus. By then, my mother trusted him completely. She would do whatever he suggested.

Within the hour, they were returning to the bus stop. My mother hung back half a block away. The man joined the line of waiting passengers. He
cleared the checkpoint manned by two Soviets, got on the bus, and chose a window seat on the near side. My mother, rocking me, tried to ignore the Soviets carefully inspecting each passenger’s documents.

“Were you afraid?” I asked, spellbound, sitting with her at the dining room table in Billings.

“No, I think I was in a sort of shock,” she replied with a half-smile.

The door of the bus closed. My mother tarried as the motor rumbled to life, as the Soviets walked away. When the wheels began to turn, she broke into a run. She waved frantically, called the man’s name. The bus shuddered to a halt. The door opened. My mother, holding me close, boarded.

Riding to Pinkafeld, my mother and her new friend marveled at their success in carrying out his plan. The bus driver had believed his claim that my mother was his wife, arriving belatedly to join him. The Soviets didn’t notice the two last-minute passengers. At their journey’s end, the man guided my mother to the house where my father and Judy were staying. “At the exact moment I saw your father, he disappeared,” my mother said, smiling. Had she only imagined him?

A joyful reunion. With our arrival, “...a big stone fell from my shoulder,” my father said in his letter. The next day, a friend drove Judy and me to Rohrbach; the Soviets didn’t demand identity papers from children. But my parents were still at risk of capture. They struggled for hours over hilly terrain and the thick underbrush of a forest—hot and tired, on constant alert for soldiers patrolling the countryside—to find their way to freedom.

Just as two men, Ihász and Ligeti, set my parents’ flight in motion, two men, their names obliterated by fear and stress, facilitated its conclusion. One, a soldier with divided loyalties smuggling people for money. He never delivered our suitcase. But he delivered us. What act of grace led my father to him while he still exercised caution in his duplicitous work, before arrogance, or greed, or carelessness drove him to guide too many people across the border at once? My parents later heard he was caught. No doubt he was imprisoned, or killed. I’d like to think that, as he planned, the money he collected from his desperate clients benefited his children. The other man, a roofer riding a bus. What made him sit next to my mother that day? Why was he willing to risk helping two strangers? Was that too an act of grace? My mother believes it was. I agree.

Four years in Rohrbach, an interlude. It’s as though my life began there, with my earliest memories, of lazy summer days on the Lafnitz River, splashing in the shallows with Judy and straddling a log my
parents pushed back and forth between them. My father oversaw the physical plant of the lumber mill owned by Omama’s family. My mother gave birth to my brother, Robie—whose severe autism would begin to manifest itself when he was a toddler—a year and a day after I was born. But the Soviets, just five miles away, were never far from their minds. At the border, the barbed-wire fences, minefields, and guard towers of the Iron Curtain appeared, a physical barrier to reinforce the ideological barrier established years earlier.

Omama and Opapa; Aunt Marianne and her family; Nagymama and Nagypapa; my mother’s sister, Aunt Évi, Uncle Laci, and my cousin, Suzie, were trapped behind that barrier, under the control of a regime growing ever more repressive. On a February morning eight months after our escape, Opapa woke with a fever. His doctor could find no cause, but later dispatched a nurse to his house. An injection. Within seconds, Opapa gasped for air, collapsed, and died.

“The Communists murdered him,” my father insists. His allegation shocks me. Opapa might have suffered an allergic reaction. But the circumstances do seem suspect. Admiration blends with my sadness as I imagine my grandfather, once Szombathely’s largest employer, hunched over a workbench, hammering sheet metal into a dustpan. He defied the Communists to the end.

I like to imagine that Opapa’s tenacity endures in me; that it’s his tenacity that enabled me to fight on behalf of abused and neglected children as a social worker; to guide my chaos-ridden child welfare agency to stability as its interim executive director; to give solace to critically ill cancer patients as a volunteer.

After Opapa died, the Communists forced Omama from their home. She moved with Aunt Marianne’s family into one room of a house the regime appropriated from her brother-in-law. Food, medicine, and other necessities became increasingly scarce. Outside Hungary, fears abounded that the Soviets might overrun the rest of Austria, if not all of Europe. My parents dreaded the prospect of reliving earlier traumas. They decided to seek political asylum in the United States, a process that took three years, until early 1952.

We crossed the Atlantic on the General Sturgis, a former U.S. troop ship crammed with refugees. Twelve storm-tossed days. The ship docked in New York City on February 14, two months short of my fourth birthday. An ironworker job promised my father in Chicago fell through. Instead, sponsored by First Congregational Church in Billings, Montana, we crossed the country by train to the western
edge of the Great Plains, near the Rocky Mountains. Billings, similar
in size to Szombathely, was otherwise worlds apart in its arid valley
dominated by sandstone cliffs. A handful of fellow Hungarian refugee
families were the only reminders of home.

During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, an uprising the Soviets
crushed while the world watched, the rest of our family escaped. Omama
settled with Aunt Marianne’s family in Austria. She wrote me letters
from there in spidery handwriting on parchment, letters only hinting at
the privations she had endured, letters I answered in broken Hungarian
scrawled on notebook paper. Our ten-year correspondence before she
died forged a loving relationship between a grandmother and her only
birth granddaughter. In 1957, Nagymama and Nagypapa and Aunt Evi,
Uncle Laci and my cousin, Suzie, joined us in Billings. We embraced
them, helped them acclimate. Nagymama, my caregiver while my
parents worked, became my surrogate mother; Suzie, my best friend.
They filled the void created by the absence of seven-year-old Robie. A
year earlier, my parents, overwhelmed by dealing with his autism while
struggling to make their way in our adopted country, had been forced
to conclude that he needed more help than they could provide. They
reluctantly placed him in the only facility available, the Montana State
Training School in Boulder, two hundred fifty miles from home.

If my parents had been able to see the future, if they had known
that the hopes and dreams the Communists extinguished would
never re-ignite—that my father would toil at Eaton Metal and Tri-Jack
Manufacturing like the people he once supervised; that my mother
would clean the houses of the Kings, the Browns, the Blaines to make
ends meet; that Robie would live out his twenty-eight years in that
state institution—would they still have come? The pull of freedom
was strong. Yet perhaps, dazzled by America’s promise, they failed
to recognize and compensate for the more insidious toll those 1948
events extracted from them. Gone was the confidence to overcome the
obstacles of language and custom, of bias against foreigners. Gone too
was the belief that they controlled their destiny. My mother, prodding
me to question salesclerks at Anthony’s Department Store, fearful
they wouldn’t understand her English. My father, retreating to his easy
chair and his Eastern philosophy books after he lost a job, until our
refugee sponsor could help him find another.

But what is the true measure of success? In a life diminished
from their hopes and expectations, a life of silence steeped in regret,
my parents have remained together, supported each other, for sixty
years. During Robie’s life, they kept him a part of our family through visits, and they raised Judy and me. My sister and I are the thriving American products of our parents’ sacrifices. We live the dreams that forever eluded their grasp, dreams that originated in a homeland to which I finally feel a connection—Hungary. My parents passed their dreams to us. And they survived.
Lionfish

After sex I say we need a safe word—
not for rope burns or blindfolds—
but for when he wants to kill himself
and knows, this time, he can pull it off.
He says he’s never seen a lionfish.
I remember before my cousin’s wedding,
as a hurricane backhanded the Alabama coast,
my aunt nestled favors for the reception,
hand-molded, white chocolate seashells,
into coolers of ice in her candlelit kitchen.
From the doorway, my uncle whispered
their saltwater aquarium was starting to die:
five days unfiltered, starfish floating,
algae greening the glass like a rapid frost.
To keep the survivors safe next door,
with the neighbor’s sea anemone
waving to her generator, my aunt dipped her net
into the tank, scooped tang, damsels,
triggerfish, before cornering the poisonous,
feathery predator lurking behind juts of coral.
As she lifted the fish and swiveled
toward the waiting plastic bowl, it slipped
the fragile mesh and flailed to the carpet.
In the second it took her bare hand to reach
for its striped quills, maybe she weighed
its gulping air against the sting, maybe
she saw herself crying on her kitchen floor,
hovering over the cooler of water, gazing
down at a seashell, like the goddess of love.
Before her husband awoke in my bed that first morning in my last house, the one with the lure of mulberry trees,

I shot seventy-eight frames: the cardinal’s breast flaming through branches, aperture widened to blur all of February.

I tiptoed back to the bed, and beside him I held the camera under my nightgown to my bare chest, the bird’s scarlet pinprick saved inside white sky after white sky after white sky, and I remembered Linda Gregg’s poem—

the wife calls her a whore and she thinks perhaps but is so happy to have lived—

even one scorched pixel of ginger, one slice to the tongue, fed to her with chopsticks across the table as if to a hatchling.

And next to his breath that morning, I raised the warm lens above my head and shot that happy girl, tumbling her

into that white space, before the next year or the world falling apart, the girl frozen, but reaching for something radiant and at arm’s length.

Note: Nampa-sha: Japanese slang. Short for nampa shashin: a photo of the girl you picked up, used as proof of your conquest.
Anne Shaw

Self-Portrait as Dido

extremum hoc miseræ det munus amanti:
tempus inane peto...
dum mea me uictam doceat fortuna dolere.
—The Aeneid, Book IV

She’s come at last to a flickering place
where sun swirls on the rockface by the spring
moving its blue and yellow hands
then vanishing, adept, adept.
The way desire passes her
over now, aloof, or splinters
through the pines along the road,
the quick stripes in succession
flailing her as she drives, the voice
on the cellphone audible, then not,
then audible again. As when, in the studio
the teacher instructs her to hold
two things in the body: extension
and retraction: one part of the thigh
drawn in, the other
turning out. How the grain
of the muscle moves
like the pull of ask
and answer, a pain she will not flinch from
as she focuses her gaze
on the variegated woodstripe of the floor.

As, under the flicker, granite, slate. Clank
of her boots in the streambed, last year’s grizzled
needles on the rocks. She has come at last
to a drop-off, a space too sheer
to cross: how to live with the flicker
touching her face but not. The never-touching,
never-coming-to. Must she unravel what she knows 
as the water, raveling outward 
shrinks in the pool each day, till the light 
can barely reach it, will not, can’t? Because things 
renounce each other (she tells 
herself) a little more each day: As affection 
leaves the body, as sun comes late to the screen, 
while the spring moves back, moves back 
from what it loves.

Cicadas throb in the distance 
as defiance, in a corner of her mind 
flares up from its sand-bed, from the place 
she banked and left it, tried 
to leave. She holds it in her being 
as a word, unspoken, hovers in the mouth. 
As the gaze holds back its hunger, as a thief 
holds back intent. If only 
there were violence to steer 
her body toward (she turns it 
like a smooth stone in her thought), a scrap 
of paper scrawled come naked and alone 
to make of sorrow some exquisite thing. 
How long will it take, she wonders 
this rending, stitch by stitch? 
She turns her face to the half-light 
where branches cast their net across her hands.
Bougainvillea

*Nairobi, Kenya*

I could take a photo of it:
this fuschia blaze stacked up against blue air
like a lavender beehive hairdo.
It’s sixty feet high if it’s one.

But what would the photo show you
if not mere beauty, slightly overdone—
How it burns for no one
along the dusty road?

And what would I do with it after?
(Since each print fails its moment, usually,
or fails in its conveyance
of the scene—)

How the blaze is stationed, careless, by the drive
of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church:
Stained glass and boys’ school barracks,
where syncopated voices
pile toward the sky.

As if, to awaken God
one must park the sentinel angel
at the gate.

As when desire fills us
with belief. Or as if
to fill our eyes

is what requires us,
what we require.
Genaro Kỳ Lý Smith

Vacation

North Vietnam, 1918

I.

I met the back of God’s hand once
as a boy of eight, long before Hồ Chí Minh thought
of overthrowing the French.
My father drove us from Hanoi
to vacation on Cát Bà Island,
and I remember that morning
still veiled in fog, dense and milky as pearls:
the rubber trees waded through their morning
while awakened workers carved lines
along their bark until white sap coursed and bled
into pails the farmers satcheled against tree trunks.

Ahead, the boulders rose above the fog,
the coastline blurred to where the land divorced itself
from the South China Sea. I remember
it took two hours to get to Hồ Long Bay
to board a boat for Cát Bà Island.
I remember the slowness of my father’s driving,
the ivory cigarette filter poised between his lips,
my mother reading La Vie magazine to take her mind off
what grew inside her, thinned her outside.

And still the fog drowned the road
that rose and fell beneath us,
the boulders loomed as big as planes,
as big as I imagined God’s knuckles,
and we were driving over the back of God’s hand,
entering heaven the back way.
It felt like cheating,
like we would get caught,
and His knuckles would form fists
to shake us free of Him. Coming off the last knuckle,
we arrived at a wharf of boats.
The boatman and his crew crowded our car
to cart our luggage onto the boat,
and father unfurled *dongs* to tip the crew
and the boatman’s fee to pilot us past the horizon of rocks.

II.

On Cát Bà Island, the sun fails to burn off
the layer of an overcast day,
and Mother’s first afternoon is spent
on the beach beneath blue and white umbrellas
as she stares at that horizon of rocks:
God’s spine, she once said. The boat pilot who ferried us through
to Cát Bà had known every notch of His column,
navigated each bone of His spine since childhood
to bring the forlorn and faithful to Heaven,
to bring us to a beach lined with chaise lounges
and umbrellas and servants waiting on patrons.
Mother reposed in her chair and stared
at God’s rough vertebrae from behind her sunglasses,
underneath her sun hat, as Father read and smoked.
He perused Mother between turning pages,
trying to remember how she was before the diagnosis.

At eight years old, I believed God existed as something
small and black inside her, that He grew, vined and knotted,
cleaved and pooled purple at the surface to show
where He had racked her white skin to ruin.
God had mapped the very landscape of her pain,
mapped the locations the French doctors had said
they could cut and singe, scoop and discard
in hopes of healing her. But no promise of mercury
or any amount of ether could change her mind.

She stood up, dropped the hat and the sunglasses,
announced that it was too hot and walked toward the water.
She walked past little children sculpting mounds, past the ones wading and kicking in the water, past the older ones floating on their backs until she was swallowed by the vast expanse of green.

Father followed and stood ashore, one hand over his brows as flat, foamless waves encircled his ankles.

Mother kept paddling out to where it seemed the blue sky cleaved the green South China Sea.

He called out to her, told her she had gone too far, and she stopped and faced us, and though she was far away, she was smiling with God’s spine behind her, His unseen hardened knuckles still clenched along the mainland as she dunked herself, bathing in His golden cure-all.

III.

We came home a week later after days of swimming, of flying kites and fishing, of eating rice, caramelized pork, stir-fried morning glories, braised shrimp and steamed snails, mackerels wrapped in paper and cooked in pits. And always Father had insisted Mother should eat more, for we never knew when.

With one arm over Father’s shoulder, her other resting on mine, we helped her work her way upstairs to the room she had known since marriage when she, the new bride and wife, slept the first night close to the bed’s edge, uncertain what was to take place. We placed her in the bed she had grown tired of from daily rests, tired of whispered prayers from nurses in white, tired of their hanging crosses and black rosary beads hovering over her, tired of watching the day start off dark, dim, bright, dim, and dark again all from her bed. So she slept for three days upon our return, and never once
did she go outside for sun or drizzle, 
for birds or thick bloomed flowers.

She just slept and slept, until she slept herself 
in the ground where God folded His fingers over her 
and held Mother in the soft flesh of His palm.
Providence

At St. Francis Xavier, November 2, 1963

Not even President Diệm
could convince air to come
into his lungs, nor could he writhe his hands free of ropes,
or engineer his skull and flesh, the bones
that structured and held his frame in place,
to harden and deflect bullets

that entered and violated
what he thought most sacred, only to succumb
to a heap in the back of an armored personnel carrier.

I wondered what he thought as he and his brother,
Nhu—haggard after a sleepless night
of fleeing from a palace of tall white columns
and marbled floors, of long dinner tables
with empty straight-backed chairs
and courtyards of ponds where water caressed
smooth-shelled rocks constructed into tiny falls,
ponds adorned with sharp-billed Birds of Paradise
with tufts of orange and blue—crossed

St. Francis Xavier’s shaded courtyard and entered
the church after Mass had celebrated All Souls’ Day,
the day of the dead. Did they see the irony in it?

In turning to a church for haven?—of praying
and taking Communion? He and Nhu must have thought
God sent men wearing uniforms from heaven,
their brass epaulettes and stars gleaming,
their ribbons of gold and blue chords braided
like the fine hairs of blond maidens,
their boots black and polished, and their short sleeves
creased as thin as doctrines, sent them floating
to His cathedral to retrieve what He gave,
recoup heaven’s losses to restore in His home
many have dreamed of one day residing.
But I was certain when Diệm’s own generals
raised him and Nhu to their feet and led them
from the long room of empty pews, the church’s ceiling spiraled
to a dome of airbrushed angels and robed saints,
of jewels that pulsed with the promise of night
and with it sleep, Diệm thought
the generals were leading them to an exodus
not found in the Bible, but one mandated by heaven,
so he believed, as the generals helped them inside the armored carrier.
And as they sat there on either side,
the doors closed, shutting out any sunlight
to allow the brothers to see each other pray
for providence long lost among the faithful.
The Starving City: Nha Trang ’75

The rice fields are oceans of green blades surging beneath the winds, and the fields compose the receding sounds of the sea.

Beyond the Central Highland Mountains, the South China Sea stretches away from Phồồng Tròn Phú cluttered with idle motorbikes starving for petrol, rickshaws’ pedals like palms thrust out for fares. The bar is absent of American soldiers roaming the nights for taps which never stopped flowing—here soldiers found God in the sticky tar-balls heated and twirled from the ends of sticks and plunged inside the navels of clay cherubs from which they drew breath for sleep; those absent from the bar found rooms above guarded by St. Peter. For the right amount of dongs, he admitted the lost to be housed in His many rooms filled with angels shedding thigh-length dresses or mini-skirts and go-go boots to expose skin as white and unblemished as clouds. Some soldiers said it was like watching angels detach their wings to expose flesh, so heavenly and virginal.

Now, people mill about with pockets lined with lint and filled with empty hands. Children suck dirt off their thumbs, from between fingers, and their bellies swell with dreams of fowl and pork, of noodles and rice, of thin-shelled lichees: pink pearls of sweet flesh and hard-seeded centers. St. Peter has cast the angels from the abundant, empty rooms to roam Phồồng Tròn Phú to bring the lost to the fold. They stand on the corners: their haggard hair hides their sleep-deprived faces, their long sleeves sheathe the purpled, punctured marks along their blade-like arms,
and their white skirts and boots, gowns and stockings are now dirtied as they pine for men who mumbled prayers and whimpered confessions while in the arms of their favorite angel.

But the Americans left long ago. They went back to their wheat and corn fields, their barb-wired territories and red-painted barns, and fire-breathing mills, smokestacks and quarries. They had gone back to their firecrackers, sparklers and anthems, their picnics and sunbathing, their well-kept lawns, and coaching Little League and Pee Wee. They returned to their railroad tracks traversing different dialects and color lines, to the Golden Arches and Coca-Cola to resume their lives lived beneath the Hollywood sign, beneath a torch-bearing statue. They had long left lugging ghosts from a country of dust and dreams to a continent called Plenty.

Yet the angels still walk past businesses that open for show, and people barter tangerine peels, potato vines, round-shaped freckled pears, pregnant strands of kelp, brown-leafed morning glories and mangoes bruised from thumbing; they barter these items for bottles of fermented scorpions and geckos and plum wines for ducks, chickens, and dogs, for fish whose lips part for air only to discover the world outside their oceans is empty of the promise of breathing.
I find a photograph among my mother’s things. In it, my daughter, then eight, and I balance our bikes as if we’ve just skidded to a stop alongside a Niagara Falls guard rail. Spray frizzes around us, white foam that obscures the falls. We smile, like jaunty jockeys, from beneath the helmets strapped under our chins. We look brave, focused and determined, hard-headed, united, wheels pointed toward adventure.

Did this picture feel to my mother like a taunt? Did it seem to say, see, Mom, I am more than a tourist in my own daughter’s life? Did I mean it that way?

When my daughter learned to ride a bike, the first person she called was my mother. Then I got on the line. My mother said, “I didn’t understand that. Something about a bike?”

I was unfairly irritated. Why couldn’t she listen? But of course she was partially deaf. It’s a disability I may inherit as I age. But why wouldn’t she exchange letters or e-mails so that she could hear our news, too?

Mostly she called every Sunday and detailed her health woes. I struggled to deepen my voice into a register she could hear, to update her on our lives. Then I gave up. I let her talk. I murmured supportive comments.

Secretly, I seethed.

What I hoped the photos I sent my mom would show:

How we zoomed along the Tuna Valley Trail, past dogs on leashes and kids on scooters and guys toting fishing poles. How we pedaled along a rushing, burgeoning creek, every swell of water and creag of rock ridged by sunlight, the wind in our faces exhilarating. Or, later: the freedom of riding the Allegheny Trail beside still, bluish water.
What the pictures didn’t show:

How, when we first started bicycling, my daughter complained when I shot ahead. How she became irritable when I rode alongside her, instructing her on traffic laws. Stay on the right, brake at stop signs, use hand signals when turning. “I know, Mom,” she said, sailing past a stop sign.

How after the sun sank beside the Allegheny River, I couldn’t shake off news stories: murdered female campers last seen alive in national parks, the Bike Path Rapist up in Buffalo, the ongoing hunt for our own local armed and dangerous escaped convict, Ralph “Bucky” Phillips. How I couldn’t shake off all the warnings from my mother about the dangers to women alone.

How, as we turned back, dusk had muddied the water to brown, and swarms of bugs bombarded us like tiny pellets, pilling my sweater with their small corpses.

**I bought the bikes instead of a china cabinet one spring, after I came home one day to find on my porch a colony of chest high crates. My mom had paid a fortune to have her dishes sent to me: platters, large pitchers, cream pitchers, sugar bowls, salt and pepper shakers, relish trays, big mugs, little mugs, twenty-eight dinner plates, a crystal bowl, a desert rose thimble, dessert plates, big saucers, little saucers—239 pieces in all.**

My daughter squeaked and snapped through ankle-deep packing peanuts. She jumped on sheets of Bubble Wrap, popping them like strings of firecrackers. “Happy Birthday to Mommy,” she sang.

I’d moved fourteen times in my adult life. I didn’t own a dishwasher. I had no dining room furniture.

But now the entire weight of family history and obligation had arrived. Stoneware with pink petals and green leaves, fine china rimmed in blue and gold, stars bursting around the periphery. They were beautiful. They filled me with sadness and dread. They reminded me of my mother’s bravery and my mother’s fears.

Years ago, she dreamed of European tours, of trundling the U.S. in an R.V., of wintering in Mexico. “I guess you didn’t inherit my gypsy blood,” she’d say, maddeningly superior, when I complained about always feeling uprooted, moving from state to state for jobs or school.

I thought of my mother as resolute in her independence, my mom who purchased her fine china herself, in the early 1950s, long before she dated my dad. She paid for the pieces one at a time out of her meager teacher’s salary, preparing for an uncertain future.
After my dad died, my mother became afraid, afraid to leave the house, afraid to travel alone. And I wondered: would I grow old like that, my tentative knees collapsing altogether? Would I shuffle and be sad and afraid? Would my blue eyes lighten to the sky shade of hers, would I let my hair go white, would I have my knees replaced, would I develop diabetes, breast cancer, and heart disease? Would I fear leaving my house, too?

And so I bought the bikes.

It was spring. The Catholic Church had abolished Limbo but astronomers had not yet demoted Pluto from planet status. My dad had died but my mother was still alive. My car, stripped of winter grime, had been dyed green by pollen. At a restaurant, a waitress placed napkin-wrapped silverware in front of my daughter. “There’s a knife,” the waitress mouthed, in case my child was too young to avoid stabbing herself or me. On the way home, a boy in a passing car flirted with my daughter. “Can’t he see my car seat?” she asked scornfully. “There’s a knife? Flirting boys? How old do you think I am, people?”

Time was sweeping us along. I fastened the bikes onto the car. I left my mom a message that we’d be away. It didn’t occur to her that cell phones had altered the world’s habits and she could still reach me, and I didn’t point it out. I picked up my daughter at her bus stop and we lit out to ride around and around Goat Island at Niagara Falls.

It was meant to be a spontaneous and independent weekend. Secretly, I was terrified. But I was more afraid of getting old. I was more afraid of losing my daughter someday. Those fears were what propelled me through stop-and-go traffic in Buffalo as our bikes wobbled gently, as if slightly precarious. They shrank my trivial worries of not finding a hotel with a vacancy, getting lost, slipping on wet pavement. The bike rack, my symbol of freedom, created drag, slowing us down, exerting its own pressure. It was at our backs, chasing after us, like a motorcycle following too close.

Then a seagull passed overhead and I drove right up to a hotel along the rapids—“So close you can feel the mist!” the billboard said. The rushing of the American Rapids made me ridiculously happy, as if a thousand far-flung pieces of myself were stitching back together.

Most trips we took were back to Kansas. My mom picked us up at the airport and jumped in immediately to outline where she had stored
important documents and mementoes. At her apartment, I parked my suitcase in her dark hall, blinds all closed, while she shoved folders and knickknacks into my hands. There was no small talk. There were no comments on the weather, our trip, or the grandkids. We headed right into the Death Tour, a guided expedition through my mother’s apartment with stops at the locations of her financial records, her will, details for the obituary, plans for her funeral. “Everything is in order, so if I die, you can access the money right away,” she said.

I rolled my eyes.

“If there’s something you want, get a piece of tape and write your name on the bottom,” my mother said. She instructed me to do this a million times. I never wrote my name on anything.

As my mother plied me with stories I’d heard over and over, the history of each heirloom, I felt badgered, like she was trying to force me into some admission or confession or emotional connection. I was hungry. I was thirsty. I just wanted to sit down.

At Niagara Falls, it turned out, we could not get lost. The hot air balloon behind our hotel could be seen from everywhere, a bulbous white moon, the landmark that gave us our bearings. We would find our way as long as it didn’t take off.

For two days, my daughter and I traced over and over the same path. Past the Bridal Veil Falls, the American and Horseshoe Falls, and the Horseshoe Rapids to Three Sisters Islands. The path along the rapids, only feet from the tumble and froth, felt like risk. Black and gray seagulls coasted on the air, landing on the path dotted by pink and white blossoms. Birds fanned their tails and took flight again. The sky was overcast. The damp air smelled fishy. Speed chilled the wind against my face as I flew past the pulse and pound of water. We stopped for hamburgers outside while tourists fresh off the Maid of the Mist rustled by in clear blue ponchos. We talked about where we’d been and where we’d go next. Periodically I located the balloon behind our hotel, floating like an unnatural daytime moon.

On every visit, my mother and I used to trace the same path over and over, the Death Tour following the same route, our conversations sticking to the same script.

“It’s so gratifying to see you as a mother,” she often said, as if each time was the first, and I thought only of my daughter’s big fits or my many mistakes.
“You really have a way with words,” she’d say, and I’d change the subject quickly, embarrassed at compliments I wasn’t sure I could live up to.

I knew that gradually she’d build to the questions she asked me on every visit: “Aren’t you grateful for everything your dad and I did for you?” she’d ask. And: “Was your childhood really so unhappy? Why do you and your brothers hate each other?”

My parents had done a lot for me, including supporting me unquestioningly when I adopted my daughter, becoming a single parent. I was deeply grateful for that and more. I’d thanked them many times. My childhood had its ups and downs, but was neither unequivocally happy or relentlessly unhappy. I loved my brothers, even if we were politically polar opposites.

For years I’d given the same answers, had reassured her, offered examples, changed the subject, ducked the conversation, but the questions always came back.

My mother was physically fragile but seemed mentally sound enough. Her repetitions felt deliberate, the questions calculated to corner me. After looping through the same conversations, as programmed as a church service’s calls and responses, the loop formed an ever-tightening noose. What was wrong with me, what kind of daughter was I, that I felt irrationally crazed, trapped in my mother’s house? That I so quickly became a small protesting fly, all tangled up in a sticky web of irritation and frustration and guilt that bound me so firmly, I was afraid I’d never escape?

In Niagara Falls, it rained. Drizzle speckled the rocks on the Third Sister, then fattened to drops that stained them the dark gray of the sky. The upper rapids rushed, frothy, powerful, turbulent as roiling storm clouds. We stored our bikes and walked to the aquarium, then to the theater that showed a History Channel film. Later we bought tickets for the Daredevil Thrill Ride. While a film of the Falls was projected onto a screen, the platform we were harnessed to bucked and jolted, lurched and pitched. We neared the Falls and plummeted over them, the platform tilting us to a 90 degree angle as we plunged straight down.

Feeling battered and bruised, I unbuckled us. “Why don’t they pour cold water over us to make it really accurate?” I grumbled. “Why don’t they just drown us while they’re at it?”

My daughter laughed. “Let’s go again,” she said.
Once after my dad died, when my daughter was a baby and my mother was stressed by grief and health problems, I by the loss of a job, we argued about things that no longer matter. “Aren’t you grateful for everything we’ve done for you?” she asked then, fixing watery blue eyes on me, the tears suggesting vulnerability but also, like a microscope lens, magnifying the foreboding insistence of her gaze.

I knew she was seeking something from me, an apology or reassurance that after a fight we could return to familiar interactions. But it seemed as if no thanks would ever be enough, that every conflict would demand renewed gratitude. I stared mutely.

“Sometimes I think I was a failure as a mother,” Mom said wistfully, and waited. I didn’t answer.

“I don’t know why you and your brothers hate each other so much,” she said, her voice sharpening. With that, she shifted from a bent, frail woman with thinning hair who’d point to models with fluffy, voluminous cuts and say, “Make my hair look like that.” With her tone, she transformed to the towering mother who could intimidate me with a glare and dismiss my absurd notions with a laugh.

“Was your childhood really so unhappy?” she asked.

All my adult life we’d cycled through these accusations disguised as questions. And now I was ruining the script, refusing to answer.

“When I’m dead, you’ll feel guilty about the way you treated me,” she said. Her eyes were a blaze of blue, following me as I went into the kitchen. It felt as if my only weapons were my ability to move faster than she could, to talk louder. She shouted after me, “Aren’t you grateful for everything we did for you?”

“Stop,” I yelled. “Stop saying those things, stop trying to manipulate me.” I sounded hysterical. She grew more chillingly quiet.

But wait, I thought. Just who was in the wrong here?

She followed me into the room and I opened the refrigerator, the door blocking the narrow galley, creating a barrier between us. Below me on a shelf were three kinds of milk: skim for me, two percent for her, soy for my daughter. I’d told her we were fine with two percent, but she’d bought the others anyway.

As I stood in the blast of cool air, the questions flew faster, the same loop we’d traveled every visit for twenty years now spiraling out of control. It was an old record twirling blurrily, needles catching on scratches, sticking on phrases until nudged forward. But I couldn’t seem to nudge it forward.
“Sometimes I think I was a failure as a mother,” Mom said.
I tried to focus on my mother as she was now, aged beyond belief, bowed over from hobbling on weak knees, from traveling through grief. She was too thin, clothes that used to hug now draping her like tents. But still my old anger bobbed up, emotions I thought long ago resolved able to transform in a moment to such potent, shocking rage.

All I could think was that I had to leave. I packed suitcases. I reserved a rental car. We drove silently to the airport to pick it up. I transferred bags. My mother hugged my daughter like she’d never see her again. “Don’t do this,” she kept saying. “Don’t leave this way.” But staying might trap me forever in a loop of accusations and futile efforts to placate. If I stayed, my anger might suffocate me, might damage us both.

I will be old someday, I thought. Someday I will need compassion from my own child.

But still, like a heartless daughter, I buckled my baby in her car seat and drove away.

This will kill my mother, I thought, and I will never forgive myself.
And I drove on.

After dark, there were still so many tourists coming and going around the Falls, a walk did not seem dangerous. My daughter and I sang softly together as the dark, dark rapids vanished into beams of colored light. In an instant my daughter shifted from “This Land Is Your Land” to “We’re All in This Together” to “One Way or Another.” Mist hovered ethereally above the crashing, the Falls themselves shrouded in mist, bathed in artificial light, lost in darkness. My mother and I never sang together, I thought.

The year after I cut short my visit with my mother, I insisted on letters instead of phone calls. She wrote to me, “I want to know all about you, your hopes, your dreams. I want to really know you.”

I no longer really knew what that meant, or maybe I just no longer wished to be known. My desires felt smaller those early years of parenting, hopes and dreams shrunk down to get me through each tedious and miraculous day. As a single parent to a toddler, I yearned for sleep, time, company, someone to be interested in small challenges and triumphs. I anchored myself in details. Turning my attention to goals or wishes or regrets would only open the door to restlessness and longing. My biggest fantasy was to rent a beach bike with wide
tires and ride in the sun. Waves would slap the sand as rotating wheels carried me alongside a rocking, crashing sea. I wanted to be the quietest presence amidst uproar.

But my mother had trouble with the letters. “I don’t know what to write about,” she said.

“Just tell me what you did today,” I answered. “What you ate. What you watched.”

Anything, I thought, to escape the story she told me over and over of my dad’s illness and sudden decline, the repeated list of her own string of health problems.

So dubiously she wrote to me about mystery novels and reruns of old shows and the lasagna she reheated for dinner. And I wrote back about my daughter’s lost teeth, her funny comments, her fascination with fruit. Every week, we tried something new: Saturn peaches, tiny Champagne grapes, pluots. Mangoes, plantains, and pomegranate seeds. It was comforting to write about fruit instead of romantic disappointments or work struggles or my daughter’s testy moods. These things just repeated themselves in endless cycles, whereas fruit, the details of moments, those were the real intimacies, I thought.

And then my mother’s letters tapered off. Gradually, she started calling me again for more years of one-sided conversations, and I launched my campaign to persuade her to switch to e-mail.

“I HATE TO THINK ABOUT BEING DEAD,” MY DAUGHTER ANNOUNCED as we crossed the bridge, leaving Goat Island. The metal under our feet was wet and slick, too slippery for a bike. Around us, other tourists streamed in both directions, speaking in other languages.

“Sometimes I think about being dead and cry all night,” my daughter said.

I would have never revealed myself to my own mother in this way.

As my daughter grows up, as I grow old, I worried, would we lock ourselves into old habits, shutting down spontaneity and authenticity? My daughter already told me that I repeated myself too much.

“What do I love you?” she asked suddenly. “It doesn’t make sense to me.”

I knew why mothers loved daughters, but I couldn’t tell her why daughters loved mothers. I didn’t know why, despite everything, I persisted, trying to stay connected to my mother, to find some trace of her lost optimism, unwrapping dishes one by one, peeling away layers hour after hour.
“You need to get on e-mail,” I told my mother during an annual visit to Kansas. Wherever I went, she followed, steering her walker in front of her, parking it and heaving herself around it, planting herself on its cushioned seat. “That way, you’ll be able to hear what I say, too,” I said. My mother kept following me, lecturing me on being kinder to the deaf. “But you can’t hear me,” I said. “It’s just a fact. I’m trying to find a way for you to hear me.”

She took up e-mail grudgingly, but soon she embraced it. We exchanged messages once or twice a week. She sent me health updates. She wrote to me about being pregnant with me, how she’d been fixing a Thanksgiving turkey when her water broke. When my mother’s kidneys failed, she wrote to me about the people she’d met who’d survived on dialysis for ten, fifteen, twenty years.

I wrote back to her about my daughter, about biking, my feeble attempts to maintain a spirit of adventure. I wrote to her about the edge of the drained reservoir where the branches of tall ancient pines draped like moss, where needles and cones, gravel and wood chips crackled under our tires like microwave popcorn. I wrote about the gorge at Letchworth, the river winding beneath us, the paths too rough for biking. I wrote about the miles of trails at Allegany State Park, the cold stream like ice swirling around our ankles during a countrywide heat wave.

Mom responded with lists of things she wanted to eat, foods her doctors had prohibited: “a cup of clam chowder, biscuits and gravy, eggs over easy, bacon and hash browns, cherry chocolates.”

And so our agendas uneasily merged: I heard daily details in her expressions of her hopes and dreams.

A month before she died, after years of paralyzing fear, my mother called and said, “I’m coming to Pennsylvania on the train.”

This did not seem like the best idea. But truthfully, I was relieved. It seemed easier to arrange dialysis and help her up and down my porch steps than to travel to Kansas yet another time and repeat all the obligatory rituals and conversations. Now that we were writing to each other, no longer spinning in the same familiar circles, I couldn’t stand the idea of falling back into old patterns.

In Niagara Falls, tourist shop books tell stories of falling, of tourists slipping into the water and tumbling over the falls,
drowning or being saved by passing boats. Some went over the Falls on purpose, in barrels and buckets. One man fell into the rapids and managed to stand firm five feet from the Falls for two hours before a helicopter rescued him. Once, balancing there on the brink of the falls, he tottered. Spectators gasped and cringed and closed their eyes, but he regained his footing and held fast, water rushing past.

I wonder if he dreamt afterward of that tug against his feet, if he woke from nightmares in which he struggled to keep himself firmly planted. Lying in bed at night, did he find himself falling, falling, until he jerked upward, fighting gravity back to wakefulness?

Falling was something I thought about a lot during my mother’s last weeks. How the Falls, falling in love, falling under spells, falling apart, or falling into old patterns—all these ways of falling became distilled now into a single relentless fear, a fear that my mother would fall. She fell leaving the train station in Erie.

Before, she’d shuffled along, hanging tight to her walker. Now she leaned on it, that curved piece of metal the only thing that held her up. Her knees weren’t doing the job. They wobbled. Her legs buckled. With every step, she teetered on the brink of collapse.

“Sit down, Mom, please sit,” I’d say. If she fell, I couldn’t catch her. If she fell, I couldn’t pick her up. One more fall, I saw, would be the end.

But eventually, I had to call 911 anyway, while my daughter, then ten, and her fifteen-year-old cousin cried at the spectacle of paramedics in blue scrubs and masks, moving with assured swiftness as they asked questions, took vital signs, transferred my mother onto a gurney, loaded her into an ambulance.

“Risk of falling: low” said the sign on the door of her hospital room. By then, she couldn’t get up, so how would she fall? I sat by her bed, trying to be a good daughter as nurses in blue coats printed with teddy bears brought medications, a bedpan. They clacked the curtain briskly closed around my mother’s bed, then swept it open again with an officious scrape. My mother gave me her wedding ring. She gave me a list of people to call, to offer messages, forgiveness, goodbyes.

Was she really dying, or was this a new manipulation? I wanted to be a good daughter. Unguarded for once, I began to fall, then suddenly caught myself: was I just being swept into the vortex of old conflicts and coercions?

A week before she died, my mother, coming down from codeine and morphine, shuddered and twitched. Spasms seized her, skin
rippling like a tiny mouse traveling under the skin of a snake. She moaned with every breath. From the hall outside her room, I heard her say, over and over, in a fierce, firm voice, words precisely enunciated, “I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.”

Twenty-four hours later, detoxified, lucid again, she changed her mind. “No more tests,” she said to me. “I’m in pain all the time. I don’t want treatments or medications or food. Just let me go. Can you do that?”

She fixed her stare on me, and I protested. She wasn’t in the advanced stages of anything terminal. She wasn’t on life support. The hospital couldn’t hook her up to a fatal morphine drip. I couldn’t pull a plug.

So I coaxed her back to life. Bought her a raisin pretzel at the mall, talked her into medications, one by one: Humalog, Sensipar, Renagel, a whole foreign language I pretended to speak. “But don’t give me the phosphorus binders,” she said, her last stand. “I won’t take the phosphorus binders.”

Three days before my mother died, I got security passes at the airport. My daughter and I wheeled her to her gate. We hugged her goodbye.

“Her skin is so soft,” my daughter whispered.

The memory of it remained on my fingers, skin softer than velvet or peach fuzz, a baby’s tender toes, sifted flour or powdered sugar, a chick’s down or a rose’s petals.

And then we were headed to Kansas again, where despite hundreds of Death Tours and hours of searching, my brothers and I could not locate her will, her funeral arrangements, her obituary draft.

For days I dismantled my mother’s life, towels and necklaces, blankets and clocks. My daughter helped. We kept some books, donated others, piled up recipes, boxed financial records, gave away her toilet paper, looted her house.

A neighbor, uneasy about an open blind, a room in disarray, odd comings and goings, called the police. I felt as if we were engaging in criminal activity. I didn’t really want any of her stuff, but someday I might. My cousins wrapped and packed pictures and glassware. We squeezed them into the passenger seat under plants from the funeral. We loaded them into my car trunk, which looked naked without the bike rack. My trunk was crammed with remnants of my mother’s life instead of the helmets, water bottles, and locks that usually tumbled forward when I stopped, backward when I accelerated.
My daughter and I reminisce about our bike ride at Niagara Falls, remembering fondly how we spun round and round the island. I remember the damp smell of earth, the wind in our faces, the quotes that stuck with me from a gift shop book: the way Margaret Fuller had once described the Niagara River’s “everlasting roar,” or Anthony Trollope’s comparison of “the voice of the cataract” to “the expression of your own heart.”

All day, their words had flowed as peacefully and powerfully as the rapids that hurled themselves along their ancient path. I rode, and I forgot that I was going in circles. My losses stopped feeling like a chain of broken links. The past seemed to flow from one swell to the next, as if rushing toward something momentous.

Yesterday, my daughter, now twelve, and I rode our bikes beside the Marilla Reservoir. She disappeared up a trail into the woods and called back, “Come see.”

I followed her, puzzled by the huge disk, like a round boulder, at the edge of the trail. It was the bottom of a fallen tree, I finally realized, the trunk and branches stretching behind it, up into the woods. We were looking at the huge plate of its trunk, its ancient tangle of roots. Time stopped for a second as we stood there, something powerful and haunting about the enormity of that disk.

Two summers ago, my mother died. Her death was like a pebble falling into water, with its momentary pock, a ripple the size of my mother’s wedding ring, then a dinner plate, then a wheel. Then it expanded beyond sight. Maybe it spread to be as big as the moon. But the water had closed over quickly. The surface of the world looked the same.

In the picture, we go on smiling, beside the guard rail, in between seasons and losses, posing as if we weren’t flowing rapidly toward the freefall of real life. It’s not in the picture, but I know that directly ahead of us is the balloon, like a bloated moon, a tourist moon. It stands, larger than life and glowing eerily, as if it could show us the way home.
Casey Thayer

The Wild Out of the Wild Blue Yonder

Near the Nevada border, you slip
to your ankles, in the conditioned cold

of the Cactus Motel, panty liners and lace,
small sails of underwear caught

in a dervish. Then you close around us.
I understand older women, how sharp

the body can shave itself, how frail you made
your bones as I hold your crystal-nothing

arms, your shoulder blades. Nothing left
to break as dust hands over a flush of red

and sets on us. Who could better
teach me how to hold a child?

You’ve been in my arms so long,
I’ve forgotten how to lay you down.
Rehab Is for Quitters

On the rail all the way to Amarillo, addicted to hot sheet motels, I place bets for the rush of loss, a sap for speed and desolate tracts of roads patched with rattler skins.

Crushed into the seat of the Chevy, I palm the stick shift as the canyon gapes along the strip of highway, shocked and wide-mouthed. St. Christopher swings the neck of the rear-view mirror, patron saint of toothpaste and hauling heavy loads. I pray because the Lord’s another gamble. Like most, he’s never done a thing for me.

Nearly losing the center line from the speed and touchy steering, I spin closer to the ritual of shattered glass, thrown clover, to the skim of water bedding the ditch. I hadn’t been clean long before I loved a girl, shimmied her out of her stockings and skirt on a night not unlike this night. This same thumbprint moon and grit of panhandle clay letting blood.

Didn’t mean to hurt her but it happened. Rolling down the window, I flick a smoke
Casey Thayer

to the tangled arms of junipers, prairie dogs
snaked in the soil. It’s the stars.

Either they’re falling or the engine’s
pulsing fast enough to run them down.
**Learning Anatomy at the St. John’s Dance**

Appraisal, you called it. The way you stroked the flanks of boys, a horse dealer keen for a steal. You corralled them by their jeans in the basement of St. John’s and saddle broke them in. I’ve test-ridden nearly everyone, you said. You’re the only one still here. Shrugged in my father’s suit, I let you steer us to the gym floor, my feet set to run, my cowlick combed flat, as the mandolin jerked out a rhythm with bass and banjo. What animals we made of the floor, your hands hogtied in mine, hair caught in your lips, your grin.

Sometime later, we lay in the field grass so they couldn’t find us. They called and called.
Avni Vyas

My Nightmares with Fish

When I wake, it’s with muscles clenched,
    then skin stitching back its nerves,
then lungs exploding for air.

The dream books say it’s lucky to dream in fish,
    that their golden coined scales mean luck, but
another book warns: cold, diminished capacity
    for feeling, a sex cod in bed, but

when I am gasping, the bluegills and catfish
    knot their tails, roil in their own filth
and in my mind all day. I drink air that I call mine.

    I kick off the covers that entomb, listening
for an echo as I reach for my stomach, and know
    the pulse swimming inside me has years yet,
and with its own lungs, will cry, evolve past me,
    elect its own becoming.
The Pageant Queen’s Prayer

I learn an aphorism from my mama that echoes under my skin: 
*Do unto others, Do unto others, dues undo mothers,* so I hum it 
when I blow-dry the coif stiff, when I turn the gun 
on my vanity, when toothbrushes and mascara wands breathe 
with their own magic. My glistening visage is a circuit. Off, it 
plummets death-like as dolls to sleep, and On, I am a window 
behind which I am each mannequin, each sequin, each church hat.

When I wash my face, I think of rendering vats, the animal 
fat burbling, crematorium of hoof and snout, and the far uglier 
life of our hog before she emerged like a debutante 
from the barn, in buckets and ribbons of skinned muscle, 
and the beauty, then, of submission. Her flay. The simple 
alley-oop of featherweight souls who give themselves over.

I pray for stiffness, Lord, I pray for acid along my gum line 
so when I smile I feel a burning into my nerves, and I am 
summoned by my corset’s forces, and those toes cramped 
like so many pain pills are vestiges of my very own flight. 
Lord, pump those tears as a blessing after a drought, and let me 
trust in you to solder me, cast me again as prizewinner.
Cate Whetzel

Miracles

Look, they are coming out of the woods, the tape and the reel, from the plasma screen, babies furred and tailed. In India, an eight-limbed octopus girl with doe’s eyes. Another child sports two faces for watching doorways: her mother, dicing a mango, her father prostrate in the courtyard before a statue that resembles her. Look, the gods are coming at last after years out of sight, creeping back into the camera lens. Today a Buddha emerged from the forest in Nepal, after sitting still for a month and meditating without food or drink for heaven knows how long. His hair is as long as a winding sheet. This boy comes to us with acne, his robe a crisp fan the color of mourning doves, and farmers and housewives change their lives after touching him. Each day on the city bus I see the evangelical poster promising the winds of heaven and their cleansing speed, and the Whore of Babylon riding a bridled tiger, the whole portrait poorly rendered. Life everlasting blooms in the jungles of Tibet, confounds doctors in Indian hospitals, wears red sequined mirror-robcs, and lashes its tail, but it never comes to Chicago. Life is long and boring on the city bus, where we insert our tickets to ride each day, both ways, but I
can wait, I can wait. I can wait for the whore
on the beast, for buses overturned in the wind-
paved street, for the gods streaming through
alleyways like feral cats, a parade of saffron
robes and vermillion paste, or else mutant teenagers
made kings of heaven, and toddlers minor
deities, to be worshipped locally. This city
and every other waits for a version
of the miracle made flesh, for wonder in our world
again. O gods, don’t make us wait too long.
New Mass Grave

As seen from the air. No one got close
enough to identify the bodies but the Nazis,
who weren’t telling. Newly uncovered mass
grave—they think it held informants, shot-down
U.S. pilots, resistance fighters, anyone
who’d talk to the Soviets about the last days
of the War. Mass grave, taking up enough space
for 219 unknown persons dumped
in the shape of the world’s largest kitchen sink,
where we might find (who knows) cowards
among the heroes. New mass grave, great hole
in the earth, home to every vanished thing—
the pearl barrette your mother wore the night
her grandfather attacked. The room
my friend was raped in, with another child,
the abandoned home that burned as they
escaped through a window. House that watched,
barrette, little witness, go into the ground.

Great mass grave, spilling lilies over every continent—
Smallpox victims in the floating gardens
of Xochimilco, that lonely, syphilitic bear
stumping through Pre-Columbian woods.
The MacDonalds of Glencoe strewn across tables
and out windows in their plaid nightgowns.
Your ancestors scalped while their brother
played dead in a creek bed, listening to their cries.
Half an East End neighborhood buried
in their Underground station, bomb silent
as a candle before it lands. In Ohio, a fraternity
pledge tied to a railroad trestle meets the 9:40 train.

Maybe we’ll get a chance to see Nat Turner’s brain in a pickling jar; the eleven Siberian tigers that starved in a Beijing Zoo; or a cove of slaughtered dolphins. My grandfather drives his car off a ferry and drowns, but not before releasing my grandmother from her seatbelt. She kicks her way out. Train tracks outpace droves of American Buffalo slumped in the shapes of castoff shoes, and last night, on the local news, another Honors student shot on the south side.

A reporter comes by. The camera loves his family as they line up to speak, except his mother, her face screwed into a parody of grief so deep that her round face is cut into triangles and she becomes the latest living mask, a museum piece.
Holy Week

Sometimes the ghost won’t speak, though we hover, hope and pace. We ask questions of the empty space above its fading body. We wait in a prescribed place, but the ghost has business sliding from its shell like a foot from a particularly shabby sock, and it does not see us. That’s Day 1 or 2. Day 3 can afford some generosity, but few grant it. They must forget how little we require, some sign that the hereafter is all right, the courtesy phone call that says Hey, I’m here. I always loved you. Don’t wait up.

Last night late I hummed a few bars off-key, a spiritual written to make you weep—“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The chorus raises a collective moan, like Marley’s ghost has friends singing with him,

OooooOOooooooOOO

my voice breaks when I try it alone.

Tomorrow is Easter, a crown of ivory buds, a brass section to complement the organ. Heaven means horns. Gabriel and his cherubs playing “Hail Thee, Festival Day,” and a soprano to hit all the high notes. Incense. Baptisms. A reason to bathe and wear makeup again. It has been three weeks and she
cannot walk through the house without opening his door and checking the crib.

When I think of how Christ remembered his friends post-resurrection, how easily he could have shed them like a winter coat and risen, glorious as an Easter lily against a gold-leaf morning, I’m grateful to God in his recalled humanity, to truly be the best of us. His mother was too poor to hire mourners and so only their friends arrived to prepare him for burial. What did she do when she couldn’t find him? What did she think of the angels, their unflappable calm, their rehearsed speech? What is going on? my mother would have said. What are you boys doing in my daughter’s tomb?

I can imagine a number of answers, but one blows by with authority divorced from the youthful virgin pictorial, a voice scolding like wind from a cave, obscuring consonants and vowels into a tangle of sound.

At Easter service in the new millennium, trumpets lift their throats into the ether, long, bright notes bounce off the stone walls. We sit in back in white dresses, hatless. Together we sing or stay silent. Dust motes appear and disappear in sunlight.
Susan R. Williamson

Morning Loss

As if, come to its own decision, the wedding gift vase slides off the shelf, falls down hard and breaks into shards. Clay vessel, raku, it’s called, fired in hot ashes, subtle patterns cracked into gray speckled glaze. I don’t keep count of days.

I leave the offered treasures alone. Undisturbed, they settle into still life.

I’m happy the vessel takes its perishing leap—acts on its own— like all pieces, people, and parts assembled day after day, as easily absent, as present.
Walther’s Law: Sedimentary environments that start out side-by-side will end up overlapping one another over time, due to transgressions and regressions. The result is a vertical sequence of beds.

After what seems like endless rain, on certain days, I know I will long to step out of this cycle, lie down on the shore in warm yellow light.

But the river swells its way in the dark, transgresses clay banks, cold-washes channels—surges on, meets its level at the delta. Out spread rust-muddied waters, an open flat liquor, a sacrament. Fermented juice on sand. Without tides, without empty places, without thunderous downpour, the river would, ultimately, regress.

And where would that leave me? There are rules from which I cannot separate. The river upswells, roils, muck walls riven, even in drought.

Never dry, only slow. Over and over, current bubbles the un-mossed rock, rises in froth, spews iridescent for landings of wings that skitter the rings of its surface.

Aswim, the living: glass shrimp, diatoms, amoeba, hordes of wriggling fry, fishes of Saturn or Jove, Christ’s fishes, food and drink for thousands from a reed basket on a hillside.

How I would climb to eat of this, to hear what he says with my own ears. All this flows. Mermaids return to the Mekong. Sadhu bathe in the Ganges.
“Come to me,” says the great boulder in the Yangtze, Moses scooped from the Nile’s rushes, when he almost got away. And what of the Baptists? What this current craves, and me along with it, helpless to undertow. Doves startle, faultless, white. The river mirrors their wings for a while, its mired bottom, silting the dead as they slumber.
Translation: Here Fishy, Fishy

Here, I find a Bible in the nightstand drawer. This is our third night in this particular motel room and we are getting restless. We are tired and stoned and our mother sleeps on the other twin bed with her mouth open, snoring loudly. The window shades are heavy and purple and black dust falls and settles over the carpet. Eric opens the Bible and I can see that many paragraphs have been underlined and the lines are not lines but holes, scratches very deep, many pages torn and tinged ink blue. This is a dark and quiet hour and there is flickering light from a muted television. Eric whispers passages to me and we laugh like much younger children. We don’t read Bibles, don’t need Bibles, don’t feel anything but the pulse of the weed and a wet wind that blows past the blinds. I touch my brother’s cheek to see if his skin is as hot as it looks, pinprick red as if all of his blood is being pulled to the surface, drawn out by the wet heat in this room. This room. It hums with the promise of rain.

But my brother’s complexion is darker than mine anyway, kissed by the whisper of Eastern European roots, while I am like my father, fair-haired and pig-belly pink. “Here,” I say. “Feel my head,” and he does, squinting at me and deciding we feel just the same. I know suddenly we will paint our toenails black and my brother says, “All right then, okay, do mine.”

When we were kids, our father often hooked a tiny sailboat to the back of his truck and we drove the two hours to the bay. It was a tiny Sunfish with a bright yellow hull. He taught us to sail around the peninsula while my mother fished from shore. She waved at us every time we turned around, the cigarette bouncing between her fingers like a rock ’n’ roll song. The Sunfish didn’t last long, eventually rusting away in the backyard like some overzealous lawn ornament, so my father’s old-money parents started chartering boats for the whole family. We sailed all over the Chesapeake Bay for weeks at a time, eating the thick stew that my grandmother would thaw on an electric burner each night. I remember I wore the same white dress every day because I liked the
way it blew in the wind and when I stood on the bow of the boat, and
the warm air whipped through my hair and up my thighs, I felt my first
shudders of romance. Often, I would kneel down then and wrap my
arms tight around my knees until I felt the black ants, swollen and slick
with blood, march down my thighs, my shinbones, my little crooked
toes. The harder I squeezed the more powerful I felt. I thought myself
a renegade, which is a word I’d read in my Anne of Green Gables
books and took to mean something akin to royalty, though I wasn’t
sure how. Also, I liked the feel of the letters in my mouth; the rolling
consonants and the hard suffix. Ade, blade, swayed. I could rhyme for
hours, watching the tops of my feet change colors in the sun. What stark
contrast to our life back home, where everything looked like the dirty
underside of a couch cushion and evenings were spent in the back room
of Skip’s, the bar around the corner. Not that we minded Skip’s much. At
least we were allowed bowls of peanuts and oversweet Shirley Temples.
Occasionally, Dad would hand us a fistful of quarters for the pool table,
which we didn’t know how to play, but we enjoyed making up our own
games anyway. We’d sit Indian-style on top of the green felt, our knees
clacking together like hollowed-out chicken bones. First person to fit a
whole pool ball into their mouth won. Or I’d use the blue chalk like war
paint and draw arrows across my brother’s smooth forehead, cartoon
skulls on his cheeks.

We ate lots of stew on those sailboats in the Bay, and listened to
the tapes that my father liked best. Bonnie Raitt, Led Zeppelin, the
Indigo Girls. We crabbed in the marshes and I remember my mother
being dismayed by how much Eric and I enjoyed dropping them into
the boiling water, my brother poking at them with a wooden spoon as
they tried to escape, while I screamed and giggled and kicked at the
stove like an animal. In the mornings, my father let us steer the boat
while he trimmed the sails, ducking beneath the boom and quickly
wrapping the rope around his arm. He moved fluidly, assuredly,
manipulating the huge Island Packet as if tuning a violin.

When my father was still young and whip smart and licking his
wounds with alcohol, his parents paid large sums of money so that he
could join a sailing crew from New England down to the islands of the
Bahamas. This was before the days of AA, of higher powers and twelve
steps and endless Styrofoam cups of coffee grinds and cigarette butts.
Before babies and their shit-heavy diapers, wet mouths, and oversized
heads. Asbestos removal jobs and wrecked cars. Nights so red and
black they burned like a solar eclipse through his insides. Before little
league games and parent-teacher conferences. Before he fucked the three-hundred pound housewife next door for a couple of Klonopin. Before she killed herself with the rest.

Before all that, I imagine him long-limbed and cherry red in the sun, tossing ropes to shore and tying his Boy Scout knots—a doomed, affable expression beneath curls of Nordic white hair. With his right hand he tosses the anchor into the water, feeling for the weight and dredge of the sand, that small vibration of rope, the last job well done. He leans back against the mast and lights a cigarette and surveys this new electric landscape, then tosses the pack to a friend.

Three days ago, our father went to jail and our mother quick-packed up my brother and me and drove us down to the New Jersey shore from our home near Philadelphia. It is March and we should be in school but we’re not. This isn’t unusual. Even though our father hasn’t lived with us for years, my mother still thinks it best to take off every time he “falls off the wagon,” as if distance alone could protect us. The drive takes nearly two hours. We know it well; we do this at least twice a year.

Now, Eric falls asleep the moment we leave the driveway and wakes up, as if by instinct, the second we cross the bridge into Sea Isle City. Today when we arrive there aren’t many fishermen, still too early in the season, but a few grizzled men lean heavily on the bridge’s steel railings, hooking their lines with wet strips of haddock or hunks of clam. Or else they sit on overturned buckets with one hand on the rod, the other holding a sandwich made with white bread, watching the tide turn below. Eric and I always make a game out of who can spot the first catch, the angry curve of the flounder’s belly like a silver scythe in the sun. There is something almost heroic about a fisherman—all that faith in the dark. The bridge trembles as we speed across, the men frozen in their various postures; we shoot into a sky that is like a shattered mirror.

We rent put-puts, as Dad used to call them, nearly every summer. They are tiny, sputtering things with a single engine that just manage to get us from the dock on the bay over to the nearby marshes where fish are hiding in the grass roots. A home video from when we were all young features one of these early trips. My mother is doing her first “Voodoo Fisherwoman” routine into the camera—a subtle performance—her eyes squeezed shut, her lips pursed like a fish. Slowly and meditatively, she calls the fish to her line. “Here fishy fishy fishy,” she whispers. “Here fishy fishy fishy.” My father laughs convulsively in the background, one hand on the engine, another holding a can of Budweiser. Eric looks up at
him and giggles, clearly more excited by his father’s ebullience than the woman performing. I laugh girlishly from behind the camera before inexplicably holding up a peace sign in front of the lens, as if anticipating the brevity of these good times. *All here together!* I imagine my younger self trying to say.

We don’t talk about where our father went or why. Because I don’t know better, I envision the process of entering jail like checking into a hotel. I see my father walking up to the desk of his own accord and receiving a key to his room, following an old woman with puffy red hair down a long dark hallway and trailing his old corduroy suitcase behind him. Or maybe it is more like the rehabs we used to visit, large, empty lobbies and television sets that were always on too loud. Outside, clusters of unshaven men in blue jeans and flannel shirts sat around picnic tables smoking and playing cards. It was at one of these rehabs that I learned how to play poker, the only game I still play well.

The next morning we eat sticky buns on the beach and rinse the caramel and shredded napkin from our fingers in the frigid water. It is overcast and chilly, but not yet raining. We watch the sandpipers chase a receding wave, ecstatically pecking at the sand until the tide turns, a deep breath, the next wave exhaling and tumbling after the birds. They skitter away in unison, legs straight as stilts.

“We okay? Everyone okay?” She is checking, again. We are still okay. Eric wants to go watch girls dance in bikinis. We heard on television that somewhere nearby MTV is taping their Spring Break Special. This is part of the reason we have come to Sea Isle rather than Ocean City, where we usually go. The other part has to do with unfamiliar terrain and liberation, our mother thinking the two identical. Eric is thirteen and doesn’t get into the MTV dance party, he tells me later, but he watches the girls through slats in a fence until a big man with an earpiece chases him away. Mom wants to read her book on a bench near the boardwalk. I tell her I’m going to the beach to do some homework. I am fifteen now, I argue, and can spend some time alone for once, *for Christ’s sake*. She looks at me, tired, and nods. We are all tired. I take off down an alleyway to smoke cigarettes and search for reusable trash. I find an empty inkwell near a chain-link fence and consider it a good day. The bottle’s opening looks like two hungry porcelain lips and suggests an era I’ve never known but suddenly miss, like a phantom limb or an estranged twin.

Sea Isle looks like an abandoned circus; neon signs pulse into the fog like lighthouses. Old men huddle outside brick bars in twos and threes while cigarette smoke drifts out of open doorways into
the morning. A spitting rain coats the sidewalk. I notice a storefront that reads “We Sell Beer and Gold.” Many blocks west a cop slowly crosses the intersection on a black horse, the beast’s tail whipping at low clouds as they turn down another alleyway and amble out of view. I feel like I’m losing my mind.

According to the local news, this is the first of many days of rain. Gutters churn. A pair of seagulls pick at the trash that is tossed out of curbside streams. You could drown in fog so thick. When I find Eric, he is huddled behind an empty shake shack trying to light a joint with a pack of matches. He is hunched over and haggard-looking, like a bit of flotsam cast out from an errant tide. I don’t ask about his missing shoe.

“Where’s Mom?” he says, picking a loose pot leaf from his tongue. He is crouched very low to the ground and in this position he resembles an old man. He is a pale kid, skinny and tall. Lately the flush of adolescence has drained from his cheeks. Instead, gray pools of exhaustion settle beneath his eyes. His hair is always messy now, even when he tries to glue the bangs straight up into the air—as if he’s in the habit of running into walls.

“I don’t know. Probably trying to flirt her way on to MTV.” We are very angry at her these days, although neither of us could say exactly why. Perhaps it is easier to be angry at the parent who is there to receive it. Last week she came home drunk at five o’clock in the afternoon and ordered us both to bed. It was the first time we’d ever seen her drunk, and we are hell-bent on never letting her forget it. There is only room for one addict in this family, and the position is filled.

“I lost my shoe,” Eric says.

“I see that.”

“Hit?” He holds out the joint, a sloppy job that smokes too much on one side.

Eventually, a day will come when I realize with horror that I was the one to introduce my little brother to drugs—handing him his first joint at twelve, sneaking out with him in the midnight hours to take hits from a pipe made from an apple, heaving barrels of change to the local CoinStar to finance the evening’s entertainment. But now, that day is still very far away. Now, we are still a team. He hasn’t yet lost control and we can still distract ourselves with games of hide-and-seek, run-and-return, here-I-am-now-I’m-not.

“Nah,” I say. “But can I have your other shoe since you don’t really need it now?” I’ve been thinking about his shoes a lot lately, real dark leather and long as platters, the shoelaces missing. I’ve considered
adding them to my collection of planters made from old shoes, which is clustered on my windowsill. I feel the shoe pots add a real sense of irony to the space, and Mom agreed, until I planted yellow geraniums in her red pumps.

Once, I glued pieces of a broken mirror to the wall above my bed, the shards of glass positioned to look like an exploding heart. For weeks, I shuddered through dreams, tiny cuts forming down my abdomen, and woke up with pieces of glass in my hair. Eventually, I gave up and took it down. Instead, I inserted the shards into some of the dark earth in my shoe pots. In the winter light they look like melting glaciers.

My brother and I walk down Ocean Avenue toward the boardwalk, Eric shoeless, both of us tiptoeing around broken bottles, paper bags, and meatless chicken bones. I make him hold my hand, not because I am particularly fond of him, but because it looks to all the world like I have a boyfriend. And there is nothing I want more than to look like I have a boyfriend. A girl with back up. I have no idea how to relate to boys other than my brother, so a real boyfriend is out of the question. It would just be nice to look involved, like Jamie Kelsey and Craig McDonald, who stumble down school hallways like they’re in a three-legged race. I am in love with both of them on different days.

We pass a man sitting inside a wooden hut at the entrance to an empty parking lot. He doesn’t lift his head as we shuffle by. He is reading a blue paperback that is swollen with moisture, the pages buckled like waves. He doesn’t seem to notice the shutters banging in the wind, the warm rain sliding down the back of his neck.

Eric takes off his T-shirt and ties it in a knot around his waist. I press on the round fist of bone at the top of his spine. What a curious protrusion, I think. He has a hang-dog neck like a marionette. He bats my hand away as we enter the arcade on the boardwalk. The boy behind the counter watches us as we walk down the aisles, poking buttons and fingering plastic guns. We look like vagabonds, road-weary immigrants suddenly deported to this dank and derelict tourist town, this aqueous vortex with caramel corn.

Just let me rest my head inside this race car, I think. I’d like to take this spaceship for a ride.

On the fifth morning Mom is up very early.

“Rise and shine!” she says, ripping at our blankets. I heard her get up to use the bathroom so I am prepared, wrapping the cheap
polyester blanket around me like a tortilla. Eric isn’t so lucky and he thrashes at the air and moans while my mother bunches up his covers and draws back the heavy curtains, asking which one of us would like to go get her coffee. We know this isn’t really a question, so we stage a silent protest.

“Alright,” she chirps, “then I guess I’m going fishing alone,” which is enough, she realizes, to at least get us to open our eyes. This is day five. We know better than to ask when we’re going home because, we figure, this is at least better than being in school. Plus, we love fishing.

She leaves us to shower and get dressed while she drives to a neighboring shore town to see about a boat. Right after she leaves I notice the money missing from my wallet, and I turn on Eric with alarming ferocity. Stealing is a new habit of his, but my occasional violence toward him is not novel. I have a very early memory of choking my brother until he turned blue. He couldn’t have been more than two years old. Choking was one of my favorite methods of assault, my scrawny brother writhing as I held him on the ground, my knees pressed deep into his stomach. I wasn’t satisfied until he cried, and I never worried about rebuttal. His counterattacks were fruitless, and if he ever got particularly aggressive I would simply roll onto my back and fend him off with a barrage of kicks, like a lizard spreading her wattle to ward off predators.

“Really, Jess? Ten bucks? You’re going ape shit over ten bucks?” His voice gets louder, he squints as if he can’t quite make me out. My mother warned me this day would come; I just didn’t expect it so soon. I realize I’m in trouble when he doesn’t start to cry. Eric has always been a big crier. He is sensitive to his surroundings; a slight change in air pressure can set him off. Eric sidles into the bathroom and I follow him. I really want that ten dollars back. I really want an apology and everlasting repentance, some acknowledgment of my moral superiority at least. I want this scraggly, petty thief to bow down in his too-small undershirt and pledge undying supplication. In the absence of all of these concessions, I see no other choice but to attack.

I catch myself in the mirror, a feral child, hair wild and teeth bared, a line of spittle down my chin. There is a scuffle. I hear the crack of his spine as he lands backward in the tub. His skull bounces off the green linoleum wall. He does not immediately react, but he appears completely composed, breathing deep and staring right through me. I’m screwed and I know it.
A few weeks before our father was arrested and the three of us took off into exile, my brother and I went to see an art exhibit in the city. It is the sort of experience that wasn’t immediately appealing, but compared to school, well, it gave us something to do. We jumped on the train during school hours and planned to be back before Mom noticed we were gone. The exhibit was inside Fairmount Park, inside a makeshift shack set up beside the river, the interior walls painted black. A woman had outfitted several ballet dancers with microphones and asked them to dance. The recording of their breathing then amplified this tiny space, with all those guttural huffs and sighs. We even heard bones cracking. There were no corresponding images, there was no music. Eric left and waited for me outside, thinking the noises were too sexual, too uncanny for his taste. “Nasty,” he said in his faux-gangster drawl. But truly, this was the stuff of birth, of original sin, of blood and atoms and energy. There were many narratives in this dark room, alongside the river, me in my city sweat. I was fascinated by the paradox of visual grace and seeming effortlessness with the grunts and groans of physical strain, an exertion I had previously associated with sex, or wrestling, or the delivery room in the hospital—but not ballet.

So what of this other soundtrack, as two siblings rage inside a wan and forlorn motel room? What was going on inside their heads, beneath the shitty dialogue (“Fuck you, assface!”), the smack of mere matter? Where is this soundtrack? I’d like to layer it over a white background, poke around it like an insect. Could our exclamations suggest some other transcendence? Is it implicit in the purity of emotions, our grief? If I could somehow transcribe these rhythms, turn it into language, maybe. Could I finger the phonetics? Sever the syllable that will drive us, finally, so far apart? But it doesn’t live here, here on the page. Our anger doesn’t translate. So we will move in circles for years, colliding like meteors captured in the same orbit, both eventually sent off course.

One punch to the jaw. Bam! Even as I crumble to the ground, the pain searing up my jaw and settling sharply somewhere near the temples—I know there is justice here. And I mourn this moment like the final act in an ageless play.

But we won’t fight this way again, limb to limb. Because suddenly I feel old, and this isn’t working. The father is still in jail, the mother still earnest and struggling, the old escapes pointless. We keep going back. There is always the drive home. Soon, I will start to worry about how often my brother gets high. I will follow him around like a scorned lover, digging through drawers and reading
private journals, handing out lectures even as I begin to snort Ritalin, at age fifteen, during my drive to school. I am bad at playing Mother, and Eric will resent me for it. After so many vacations sleeping in the same room, we’ll begin to lock our bedroom doors, each afraid of the other, still too close for our own good. Mom will begin to drink in earnest, develop her own pot habit. I will enter college and begin to drink compulsively, too, never satisfied. We’ll spend years running away only to be yanked back in, as if attached to giant rubber bands fused to the home, soldered to our grief.

But now my brother and I are still sweaty and intimate, each of us breathing heavily and dissecting the other’s stricken face—studying the familiar bone structure, the close-set eyes, the swollen lips—when there is an authoritative knock on the motel room door. My brother rushes to me, uses the bottom of his T-shirt to wipe away the trickle of blood on my lip. We swing open the door and stand side by side. Our posture looks improbably rehearsed, the back of Eric’s neck already blooming with blue whorls, my chin still sticky and pink. The cop is young, twenty-five or twenty-six, blond and stocky in her pressed, navy blue uniform, her bun beginning to unravel. Behind her the police car is idling. She doesn’t plan to stay long.

I lean on Eric’s shoulder casually. Nothing happening here, Miss. Just getting the day started. Me and my bro.

“Where are your parents?” she wants to know. She wants to know where we belong, what we’re doing here. We should know there were some noise complaints, some unhappy customers. Why aren’t we in school, she wonders aloud. There is an expression on her face, pursed lips and disapproval, and I think I can read her mind. I’ll never let my children go crazy like this, she thinks, I’ll never leave them alone. She thinks, Who would stand for such brutality? Who would let their children become so unkempt, so wild? So cunning and cruel, she thinks, I won’t have this, this dysfunction in my life. She thinks we are beyond repair. She thinks her children (just babies now, shiny and new, precious lambs), her children will know God, will treasure one another, will sing like angels and knit sweaters and read books to the elderly.

She will go. It is for the best. These kids still have their limbs, no? Just a simple case of noise, meaningless sound. Shit happens all the time in places like this. “Keep it down,” she says, turning to go.
When Mom comes back to the motel room she is smiling, buoyant, a boat lined up and already paid for—“Half off ’cause I’m so cute!” We are already bundled up in oversized sweatshirts. I wear a scarf to disguise my purple jaw because she needs our shit like a hole in the head. The rain has not stopped, only slowed to a light drizzle, cold and clean. We will sit on this boat for hours, silent but for our breathing, hot gray puffs of steam like Morse code. We will be, for the moment, mollified by our own rhythms: bait, cast, reel, bait, cast, reel, our mother dangling a cigarette between her lips and fumbling with her line, occasionally calling out softly, “Here fishy fishy, here fishy.”
The Beginning

My mother does not know where the arrows of God will fall. She does not care, either. She has a craving for afufa, the eggplants. She wants to dip them in a sauce made of crushed chili pepper mixed with palm oil and salt. She wants to pluck some of their green bitter leaves, wash them in rainwater and chew. But the first rain of the year did not make green leaves sprout.

It is February and the late harmattan winds have just finished sweeping up the red soil of Nnobi. The wait for the first rain of the planting season has just begun. It will last until April. Outside, the air is dry. A tree branch, dead from severe thirst, breaks off and falls in broad day light. The sound rattles my mother as she sits in our living room. She thinks the mortars have finally gotten to Nnobi.

Though my mother will not acknowledge it, little things unnerve her these days. The raging Nigerian-Biafran civil war, whose center is a few towns away from us, troubles her. She misses my father, who is fighting at the war front. She needs him to go to the Catholic charities relief center and bring home salt, cornmeal, milk and stockfish. Though she has Alice, her house help, my mother needs him to be around the house and help out now that she is too heavy to bend down and pick up things. She needs him to massage her back. She needs him to count the number of toes on her feet. He promised that unlike men of his time, he will be there when she gives birth. But the war has thrown their plans into disarray.

At night, the sound of transport planes rushing relief into Biafra keeps her awake. She wonders what fate awaits her yet to be born child. She knows that she has not been eating the right combination of food that the local midwife has recommended. Cassava leaf soup is not a substitute for bitter leaf soup. Rats and lizards are not substitutes for goats and cows. The home economics course she studied at the teachers’ training college is of no use in a war zone. Her antenatal visits to the diocesan maternity are just perfunctory rituals because there are no practical ways of applying what the nurses suggest. It is
the ninth month, and she has stopped worrying about the child being born prematurely. Now, she worries if he will come out fully-formed or deformed due to malnutrition. Will he fall victim to kwashiorkor when he is born? Will he find enough milk in her breasts to suck?

Sometimes, when my mother walks out to ease herself, she wonders if my grandfather is sitting on his grave and watching her. It has been eleven months since he died. Because it is wartime and my father is away at war, my grandfather did not receive a proper burial. It is believed that the spirits of dead people hang around their graves for seven days before they finally go. But those who do not get a proper funeral stay around for a very long time. Some say that they stay in the world of the living until they get the burial they need to be admitted into the world of the dead. Often, the dead who do not get the proper burial they desire get annoyed and rain curses on their children.

My mother is not afraid of my grandfather. Unlike most daughters-in-law, she had a cordial relationship with him. He adored my mother because she can read, write and speak the white man’s language. Like everyone else, he called my mother “Miss.” Still, my mother does not want to see his ghost. She does not even want to dream about him. Dreaming about him while she is pregnant means that he is sending her a message. She does not want any message from the past. She wants to move forward, onwards like a good modern Christian woman. But much as she tries, she cannot get away from my grandfather. She was one of those caring for him when he died at Iyi Enu Hospital now relocated to Ihiala because war has reached Ogidi. She heard him say several times that he would be coming back soon.

“To do what?” my mother often says in her mind whenever he blabs about it.

“To acquire knowledge and avenge what the British did to me,” my grandfather says to family members at his bedside, as if he knew the thought in my mother’s mind.

Often, my grandmother assures him he is not going anywhere anytime soon and that his son will complete the education for him when the war is over.

But grandpa wants knowledge and revenge for himself.

The banter usually goes on until he is either too tired to talk or falls asleep.
In the morning, the sound of fighter jets bombing Biafran towns keeps my mother worried. The Egyptians who pilot the Nigerian jets had dropped a bomb in Nnobi. It fell into an erosion gully. People who have visited the crater tell the story of how it left a seemingly bottomless hole in the ground. They wonder what damage it could have done if it landed at a church or a market which are the usual targets of such bomb raids on Biafra. The sounds of gunfights and shelling at Nwasike hill in Ogidi tells my mother that it is just a matter of weeks before the war gets to her. She hopes the child will be born before it will be time to flee and join the millions who have become refugees.

When she wakes up in the morning, she walks over to the next house and greets my grandmother who reminds her that the baby in her belly is her husband.

“What if it is a girl?” asks my mother.

“I’ve told you it is Ezeobidi, my husband, who is coming back,” my grandmother says.

When she is close to my mother, she tries to rub her hand on my mother’s belly. But my mother always pushes her hand away. It does not stop my grandmother, though, from trying again and again, every day.

This morning, she lets my grandmother touch her belly.

“My husband, my husband,” she coos.

The first visitor that comes in each morning is Onyikwo. He is my father’s age-mate but he did not go to war. He puts ash on his hair to make it look gray. Soldiers seeking recruits for Biafra find him in his shrine making supplications to the gods. He gives soldiers charms to protect them from enemy bullets. He runs three geese feathers over their heads and tells them they will be invisible to the enemy. None of the soldiers who have received his blessing and his charms have returned from the war to attest to their magical potency. He has learned to walk like an elder, holding a walking stick in one hand and a colored fan in the other. His beard is wild and graying. He does not take his bath quite often, so he smells like the calico that old people wear.

“Is Ezeobidi here?” he asks as he walks in.

“Not yet,” my grandmother says.

My grandmother offers him kola which he refuses with the excuse that he has an urgent task for the gods. He turns back and goes home. He lives across the fence from us, so he does not have to walk too far.

“Why is he always coming to check?” my mother asks Grandma each time Onyikwo leaves. “Can’t he stay at his shrine and see the birth?”
“Onyikwo comes to make sure we made it through the night. It is not that he does not know my husband, Ezeobidi, has not yet returned,” my grandmother says.

“If I dispute it now you will talk of Eze Ideyi and Nwaenyi’s son, Laz.”

“Ah!”

Nwaenyi’s wife takes in while his father, Ogbuachi, is still alive. Whenever she goes to see her father-in-law who lives four houses away, the old man refuses to look at her. When she gives him stuff she bought for him, he receives them without looking at her. It is an unusual way for a father-in-law to treat his son’s wife.

To those close to Ogbuachi, he keeps telling them he is coming back. “But you haven’t left,” say those who are of the same age he is.

While Nwaenyi’s wife is in labor, the old man dies.

Laz comes into the world and is hailed as a reincarnate of his great-grandfather.

Weeks after, little Laz becomes sick. All the medicine men in their kindred are consulted but none comes up with the diagnosis of what is wrong with him.

One day, as he lies in the arms of his mother, losing his breath, someone suggested they go and see the great medicine man, Eze Ideyi, because he must know what eluded all the medicine men of Awuda.

By the time they get to Eze Ideyi’s house, Laz’s body is limp and cold. Eze Ideyi goes into his shrine and consults the oracles. The verdict of the oracles comes swift and clear.

“You all have been calling this boy the wrong name,” Eze Ideyi says. He tells Nwaenyi to call his son his father’s name.

“Ogbuachi,” calls Nwaenyi. His voice is weak and tired for he can see that his son is hardly breathing.

“Is that how you call your father?” scolds Eze Ideyi. “Speak louder.”


Laz waggles in his mother’s hand and coughs. His eyes open. He becomes well and never gets sick again.

At his christening weeks after, his parents give him the Christian name Lazarus because he is believed to have woken up from the dead.

Though everybody in Nnobi knows Laz’s story and quotes it in support of the argument for reincarnation, his is not the norm. Often, the pregnant woman sees in a dream the person reincarnating. Some claim that the dead tell them what their intentions are. In some cases,
before the man dies, he tells family members from whom he will reincarnate. And once the woman bears a male child, it is believed that the man has returned.

There have been cases where the baby does have the same birthmark as that of the person reincarnating. In many cases, people see the same physical features, mannerisms, and composure. Babies who are reincarnates often act older than their age. Families that believe in consulting the oracles do take the newborn to the shrines to get a confirmation.

At a different time, my family will be preparing for a feast. Women will be painting the walls of fences with colorful ụli dyes as my mother’s delivery day approaches. On market days, spices and fish are bought and stored in anticipation. Visitors who come to see mother and child will be winéd and dined. A nursing mother is pampered with spiced yam porridge that comes with a generous addition of dried fish.

The first child sets the tone for the emerging family. If the baby is a female child, she will be my grandfather’s mother, Mgbogo Udo, who has returned. It won’t be my grandmother because she is still alive. If it is a boy, he will be my grandfather. The first male child of any man calls for a big feast. He is the heir apparent and must be welcomed to the world with great joy.

But this is wartime. There is no yam left in the barn. The few goats in the pen are mortgaged. Even those who have the resources to host a feast will not find people to attend. The sound of the flute has not played for three years now. Instead, it is the funeral gong that has been chiming, death after death.

That evening, my mother begins to have contractions. She looks across our fence and calls Ogbaelo, one of Onyikwo’s wives.

“It has started,” my mother shouts.

Ogbaelo rushes over to our compound.

My mother has packed her overnight bag when Ogbaelo arrives. Together, they hit the road for a ten-mile journey across the town to the maternity.

The diocesan maternity is at the other end of Nnobi, close to the town of Nnewi. Nnewi is the hometown of the leader of Biafra, Col. Odumegwu-Ojukwu. The Nigerian forces are converging at Nnewi for a final showdown.

My mother and Ogbaelo walk in the direction of the fight. Their paces are not straight and smooth. When the contraction increases,
my mother stops and holds herself tight. She supports her hip with her hands until the contraction eases. When it is over, she tries to cover some distance before it comes again. The roads are deserted except for areas around Nnobi Central School where refugees from other towns already occupied by troops belonging to the Nigerian side of the conflict are housed. All around, they see young boys wandering in the bushes searching for wild animals, fruit, or anything that looks edible. Some hunt birds with catapults.

The evening breeze invigorates my mother. The pathways get narrower. As fewer and fewer feet tread on them, due to war activities, nature retakes its space. The melody of the evening reduces the ache my mother feels.

The moon is out, full and yellow and tearing the clouds apart as it cruises the sky.

About two hours later, my mother arrives at the maternity. It is a rectangular-shaped building with a small bungalow built adjacent to it for the midwife. My mother is given a bed in the only ward, a twin-sized mattress placed on the cement floor. Despite a generous use of Dettol, flies still hover around. The eastern side of the hall has dozens of expectant mothers and the family members that accompany them. It is poorly-lighted with kerosene lanterns. The air inside is humid. The midwife makes her rounds, feeling the position of each woman’s baby. Her assistants give out water, food and medicine. At the western side are women who have given birth. A blue curtain separates the two wards. At one side, newly born babies cry. At the other side, women having contractions scream. As the sun sets and night falls, the sound of cannon fire and mortar explosions add to the discordant sound inside the hall.

At 11:45 p.m. on the night of February 26, 1969, I come out into the world. The midwife cleans me up and hands me over to Ogbaelo who had been holding my mother’s hands all through labor. Ogbaelo looks at my face, my tiny legs and all of my five-pound, thirteen-inch body and says, “Ezeobidi, welcome back.”
Contributors’ Notes

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Jasmine V. Bailey holds an MFA from the University of Virginia and has been an O’Connor Fellow in creative writing at Colgate University. Her chapbook, Sleep and What Precedes It, received the 2009 Longleaf Press Chapbook Prize and her book-length collection, Alexandria, is forthcoming from Carnegie Mellon University Press.

Contributors' Notes

L. Annette Binder’s fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in The Pushcart Prize XXXVI, One Story, American Short Fiction, The Southern Review, Fairy Tale Review and others. Her collection Rise received the 2011 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and will be published by Sarabande Books in August 2012. She is a student in the Programs in Writing at the University of California, Irvine.

Katherine Bode-Lang’s chapbook, Spring Melt, which won second place in the 2008 Keystone Chapbook Contest, was published by Seven Kitchens Press and won the 2010 New England Poetry Club’s Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize. Her poems have appeared in Subtropics, Mid-American Review, Rattle, and Hayden’s Ferry Review. She holds an MFA from Penn State University, where she is now the Assistant Director of The Methodology Center, a research center addressing issues in the behavioral and health sciences.

Mary Bush is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of North Texas. Her work has been published in Front Porch, The Mayo Review, The Rectangle, and The North Texas Review. She has won the North Texas University Writing Contest Award, the Eleanor B. North Poetry Award, and the Judson Q. Owen Award.

Christiane Buuck is happily married to “her Dave” and teaches writing at The Ohio State University. Her artwork has recently appeared in the Connecticut Review and Ruminate. Her nonfiction has appeared in the Seneca Review.

Christina Cook’s poems, translations, essays, and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of journals, most recently including Dos Passos Review, Prairie Schooner, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Valparaiso Poetry Review, and Cimarron Review. Two of her poems were nominated for the Best New Poets 2011 anthology and her manuscript was a finalist for the 2010 Bull City Press First Book Prize. Christina is a contributing editor for Inertia Magazine and Cerise Press and teaches writing at Colby-Sawyer College.

E. Farrell was a finalist for the 2011 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize. He is a son of the Midwest, present resident of the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts, sometime ditch digger, retail manager, salesman, international executive, teacher, chaplain, student, consultant, security
guard, orderly, father, husband, poet, singer—and a full-time human being. His story “Beirut” was accepted for publication in the Spring 2011 issue of Furnace Review.

Rachel Furey is the winner of the 2010 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award from Crab Orchard Review. She received her MFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and is currently a PhD student at Texas Tech University. She is a winner of Sycamore Review’s Wabash Prize for Fiction and her work has also appeared in Women’s Basketball Magazine, Freight Stories, Squid Quarterly, Terrain, The Adirondack Review, Waccamaw Journal, and elsewhere.

Erika Reich Giles is the winner of the 2011 John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize from Crab Orchard Review. She completed the Certificate Program in Nonfiction Writing at the University of Washington, and her work has been published in the Seattle Times, Clackamas Literary Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Ascent, and two anthologies. She is currently writing a memoir, Becoming Hungarian, which is based in part on her essay, “Flight from Hungary.”

Julie Hanson’s poem “Covenant” appears in her collection Unbeknownst, winner of the 2010 Iowa Poetry Prize and published by the University of Iowa Press in 2011. She was a finalist for the 2011 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize. Other awards include the 2010 Adele and Robert Schiff Poetry Prize, the 2011 New Ohio Review Prize in Poetry, and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her poems appear in the Cincinnati Review, Diode, New Ohio Review, Great River Review, Mississippi Review, and on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily and Daily Palette.

Chris Haven has poetry in Smartish Pace, Grist, New York Quarterly, and Sycamore Review. He teaches creative writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and edits the journal Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture. The Plaza IGA in the poem was located in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and after decades of doing business, like a lot of small, independent stores, did not survive. It’s now a Goodwill store.

Cynthia Huntington’s fourth collection of poems, Heavenly Bodies, is this year’s Editor’s Selection in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry and is forthcoming in Fall 2011. She lives in Vermont and is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College.
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*Nimisha Ladva*’s stories have appeared in the *Connecticut Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Stand*. She has been featured at Philadelphia’s First Person Arts Festival.

*Katherine Larson*’s first collection, *Radial Symmetry*, was chosen by Louise Glück as the winner of the 2010 Yale Series of Younger Poets. She lives in Arizona.


*Nancy McCabe*’s creative nonfiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crazyhorse*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *Newsweek*, has made the *Best American Essays* Notable List four times, and has received a Pushcart Prize. Her books include *After the Flashlight Man: A Memoir of Awakening*; *Meeting Sophie: A Memoir of Adoption*; and *Crossing the Blue Willow Bridge: A Journey to My Daughter’s Birthplace in China* (forthcoming 2011). She directs the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and teaches in the brief-residency MFA program at Spalding University.

*Jeffrey McDaniel* is the author of four books, most recently, *The Endarkenment*, published by University of Pittsburgh Press. He is a recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and his poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review* and *Best American Poetry 2010*. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York.

*Claire McQuerry*’s poetry collection *Lacemakers* will be published in December 2011 as the winner of the 2010 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. Her work has been published in *Double Change*, *Comstock Review*, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA at Arizona State University and currently teaches writing and literature at the University of Missouri, where she is working on a PhD in poetry.

*Jessica Hendry Nelson* was a finalist for the 2011 John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize. She is the nonfiction editor at *The Fiddleback* and teaches writing at the State University of New York in Purchase, New
Contributors’ Notes

York. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Threepenny Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Fringe*, and elsewhere. She was the first-place winner in *Alligator Juniper’s* 2011 national contest in nonfiction and the winner of the Richard M. Ford Award for Excellence in Writing. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she now lives in Norwalk, Connecticut.

**Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo** was a finalist for the 2011 John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize. His short story “The Butcher, the Surgeon and Me” was a finalist in *Glimmer Train’s* 2009 Open Fiction competition. Another chapter of his memoir, *Because I Am My Grandfather*, will be published in the *Saranac Review*, Winter/Spring 2011. He just finished work on his first novel, “Death on Mount Trashmore.”

**Ricardo Pau-Llosa** has published eight books of poetry. He has been featured in the Poetry Series of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS), the *Writer’s Chronicle*, *Saw Palm*, and other venues. A prominent figure in the visual arts, his collection and career as a critic and theorist were the subject of a major exhibition and book at the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, in the fall of 2010. His website is www.pau-llosa.com.

**Nancy K. Pearson** was a finalist for the 2011 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize. Her first book of poems, *Two Minutes of Light*, won the 2009 L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award and was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. Her book has been selected as a Must-Read from the 9th Annual Massachusetts Book Awards. She won the 2011 Wabash Poetry Prize and a Massachusetts Cultural Council Finalist Grant. Pearson was awarded two seven-month poetry fellowships at The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee, she now lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and in Houston, Texas.

**Emily Pérez** holds a BA from Stanford University and an MFA from the University of Houston. Her poetry has appeared in the *Laurel Review*, *Nimrod*, *DIAGRAM*, *Borderlands*, and her chapbook, *Backyard Migration Route*, will be available in August from Finishing Line Press. She teaches high school English and Gender Studies in Seattle, Washington, where she lives with her husband and son.


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**Julia Phillips** was a finalist for the 2011 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize. Her work has been published in the *Splinter Generation, Drunken Boat,* and *Bound Off.* She was named a finalist for the *Glimmer Train* Short-Story Award for New Writers and is the recipient of a Fulbright Grant to Russia in Creative Writing. She lives in New York City.

**Donald Platt**’s fourth book, *Dirt Angels,* was published by New Issues Poetry & Prose in 2009. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review, AGNI, Michigan Quarterly Review, Prairie Schooner, Antioch Review, Green Mountains Review, Shenandoah,* and *Western Humanities Review.* He has been awarded a 2011 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. His poems have won three Pushcart Prizes and have been anthologized twice in *The Best American Poetry.* He is a professor of English at Purdue University.


**Kristin Robertson** is a PhD candidate in creative writing at Georgia State University. Her poetry has appeared in the *Spoon River Poetry Review, Passages North, Cimarron Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Roanoke Review, Whiskey Island,* and *Yemassee.*

**Alexis Schaitkin** is a Henry Hoyns Fiction Fellow in the MFA program at the University of Virginia. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times, Southern Review, Gastronomica,* and *Ecotone.* She is the fiction editor of *Meridian.*

**Greta Schuler** is the winner of the 2011 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize from *Crab Orchard Review.* Her essay “Fragile” appeared in *Creative Nonfiction* as the winner of the magazine’s 2010 MFA Program-Off Contest. Her translation of a Shona poem was published in the *Drunken Boat,* and her work has placed in the contests of *Narrative* and *Fourth Genre.* This summer she will be completing a novel at Yaddo and MacDowell Colony.
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**Anne Shaw** is the author of *Undertow* (Persea Books), winner of the Lexi Rudnitsky Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harvard Review, Black Warrior Review, Copper Nickel, Drunken Boat,* and *Indiana Review.* She has also been featured in *Poetry Daily and From the Fishouse.* Her extended experimental poetry project can be found on Twitter at twitter.com/anneshaw.

**Genaro Kỳ Lý Smith** was born in Nha Trang, Vietnam in 1968. In 1972, his family moved to Los Angeles, California. He earned a BA in English from California State University, Northridge, and a MA in literature and MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University. His works have been published in the *Northridge Review, Amerasia Journal, turnrow, dis-Orient,* and *Gumbo: An Anthology of African American Writing.* He lives in Ruston, Louisiana, with his wife and their two daughters. He teaches at Louisiana Tech University.

**Casey Thayer** received an MFA from Northern Michigan University and has poems forthcoming in *American Poetry Review, Conte, The Normal School,* and elsewhere. He is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Rock County.

**Avni Vyas** lives in Tallahassee, Florida, where she teaches composition at Florida State University. Her poems have appeared in *Juked, Meridian, Gargoyle,* and *River Styx.*

**Cate Whetzel** taught for two years in Chicago elementary and middle schools as a Poet-in-Residence with The Poetry Center of Chicago’s Hands on Stanzas program. She is a graduate of Kenyon College and Indiana University, and her work has appeared in the *National Poetry Review, New South, Chiron Review, Phoebe, Louisville Review,* and *Damselfly Press.* She currently teaches American literature and creative writing in Michigan and lives in Ferndale with her husband, poet Ben Debus.

**Susan R. Williamson** is Assistant Director of the Palm Beach Poetry Festival, and she is currently an Oppenheimer Fellow in New England College’s MFA program. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sanskrit, Paterson Literary Review, The MacGuffin, StorySouth, Willow Review, Virginia Quarterly Review,* and in the anthology, *Letters to the World.* She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Boca Raton, Florida.
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